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The Doodle Pods Have Landed © Luke Ramsey, 2008.

In Memoriam

The Editors and staff of *On Spec* pause
to remember and pay homage to

Sir Arthur C. Clarke

Dec. 16, 1917 - March 19, 2008

His work and his vision of the future have
influenced millions of scientists, writers, and
readers alike. Nobody will ever fill his shoes.

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Mom Always Liked You Best

Diane Walton & Susan MacGregor

From time to time, I am asked what my favorite *On Spec* story is. I tend to look as wise and parental as I can, and say something like “Oh I couldn’t possibly play favourites. I like all our stories equally.”

That’s a crock.

So now it is time to come clean. The one *On Spec* story that will always tug at my heart is James Alan Gardner’s *Muffin Explains Teleology to the World at Large* (Spring 1990). I’ve loved that delightful little “end of the world as we know it” tale since the moment I first read it in the slush pile. It won the Aurora Award for best short story published that year. We included it in the *On Spec: The First Five Years* anthology (published by Tesseract Books—copies are still available from Edge Publishing, if you are interested). Several years ago, I was fortunate to meet Jim Gardner at a writers’ conference, and was able to tell him face to face just how much I’d admired that precocious six year old child, Muffin, who sulked, “*When I rule the world, there won’t be any waxed paper...*”

Normally I hate “cute kid” stories. We certainly see a lot of them in the slush pile—kids exploring the local haunted house when Things Go Horribly Wrong, kids as victims of abusive parents, kids practicing magic that Goes Horribly Wrong (like who saw THAT one coming?), kids who use magic to get revenge on the playground bully—the list goes on. Lots of Things Going Horribly Wrong. Kids, in poorly-written stories tend to be handy victims or miniature adults, or way too cute.

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Muffin is not a victim. Muffin is wise beyond her years, but she is far from a miniature adult. Muffin is a typical six year old. Muffin will bite and scratch to win an argument with her big brother.

Muffin is also a prophet. Muffin very calmly foretells the end of the world, but not with floods or fire or natural disasters. The world, Muffin says, will end in "*perfect frozen moments*" when we finally reach the place we've been traveling to all along. After that, what else is there to do, except stop and get off the ride? What else is there to do but look forward to the grand adventure that comes AFTER everything stops? Sounds a little far-fetched, right? Everyone in Muffin's family thinks so too. Until the monks arrive at her front door, looking for "*her gloriousness*".

This story skillfully blended all the elements that I look for in a perfect story. It has compelling and entertaining characters. It has a plot that makes you want to turn the pages. It has genuine humour. And it has a profound sadness. A sense of loss and yet a sense of finding an inner peace that still chokes me up when I read it aloud. I won't spoil the end for you.

Now that is just one humble editor's opinion. But other *On Spec* folks have their favourites too. Here is Susan, to tell you about her favourite children...

• • •

When Diane asked me to think about my favourite story, I couldn't pick one. I ended up picking three. Unlike *Muffin Explains* which is a bright and refreshing piece, my three favourites are dark, biting, and cynical. They are also stylistically different because they digress from the more conventional third-person limited point of view. In all three pieces, I was drawn by a compelling plot and the writer's skill in delivery.

You have to love a story that opens with: "*Hey, Squiffy: Sorry to hear about the bowel infection. Even sorrier to hear that it's one of the intelligent ones.*" Through a series of back and forth letters, Hugh A.D. Spencer's *Sticky Wonder Tales* (Fall, 2006) follows the evolution of two brothers who, via government sponsorship, undergo physiological and mental changes in order to understand alien telepathy or technology. Stephen is busy turning into an alien turtle with an IQ of 350. Andrew grows breathing pores and tendrils that link him to an alien ship's software. Neither foresees what happens when government mavens cut their programs. By the end of the story, a worse fate than being shelved looms on their horizon.

In Cliff Burns' *Printed Matter* (Spring, 2004) Russell gratifies his taste for the macabre by buying books from a mail-order California book seller. Russell's favorite titles include *Psychopathia Sexualis*, *Written in Blood*, and *The Torture Garden* among others. When Russell is sent some really horrific material that even he questions, he asks, "*Stanley—is there such a thing as going too far?*" He answers his own question by replying, "*I guess at this point, I'd have to say: YES.*" Further printed matter follows, the content of which we can only guess. When Russell decides to terminate his business relationship with the bookseller, he receives photographs that convince him he's no longer the master of his life.

Finally, Robert J. Sawyer's *Just Like Old Times* (Summer, 1993—also in *On Spec: The First Five Years* anthology) skillfully weaves together three points of view—that of serial killer Cohen, his judge who sentences him to death, and various omniscient details (newspaper clippings, etc.) that provide the reader with information. Through chronotransference, Cohen's mind is transferred into a living, breathing Tyrannosaurus Rex, where he not only learns how to control the beast, but give full vent to the beast within.

Ironically, all three stories end on a positive note, which surprised me when I considered their merits. *Sticky Wonder Tales* finds the brothers supportive of each other in their misery. In *Printed Matter*, Russell defers to an even bigger predator than he is. And in *Just Like Old Times*, Cohen is buoyant in the knowledge that his *joie de mort* can continue on a much more significant scale. Perhaps this ability—to puncture the dark with a stab of light—is what makes these pieces my personal favorites.

• • •

Last issue we welcomed new Fiction Editor, Barb Galler-Smith to our team. This issue we have more new faces. Robin S. Carson is our new copy-editor and fiction editor. Robin comes to us after a long and successful career as a Drama and English teacher in the city of Edmonton. An expert in Theatrical Make-up, like his father before him, Robin as also taught in the BFA Drama program at the University of Alberta. Now-retired, he teaches Latin occasionally, and writes book reviews for the *Edmonton Journal*. We're going to help ease his journey to the Senior Citizen menus at Denny's, by putting him to work here at the magazine.

Another new behind-the-scenes personality is Colin Lynch, of *R Cat Communications*, the creative genius behind *On Spec's* new web site. Colin's

been an avid fan of *On Spec* since the day he learned about it (he sort of had to, with me sitting next to him at our government job every day), and his innovative ideas never cease to amaze me. Check the site for the new and interesting stuff, including a downloadable *On Spec* flyer. If you are attending a Science Fiction convention, or writers' event, or if you know a store or coffee shop where you can leave flyers, feel free to download the PDF and print copies for distribution. We have often said that our readers are the best advertising. We would consider it a favour if you do. Those of you who are members of the *I READ ON SPEC* Facebook group, may also be aware of the little challenge we have issued. If you don't plan to keep your copies of *On Spec* once you have read them, then leave them someplace public, to be found and hopefully read by a curious passer-by. The Business Traveler Lounge at Heathrow Airport, I'm told, is a better place for having *On Spec* in it.

Another initiative we're planning, is a sort of "*On Spec* Garage Sale". Send us a donation of your choice, along with the name and address of a school or perhaps a library, and we will select a box of back issues from our shelves, and send them to the recipients with a letter identifying you as the benefactor. We are also prepared to provide boxes of *On Spec* to Canadian troops serving overseas.

Our thanks go out to our former web guru, Elaine Chen, and to former fiction editors Peter Watts and Steve Mohn, who have moved on.

Entries have been arriving for our Youth Issue writing competition, so get the word out. There is still time before the May 31 deadline. See the ad in this issue and on our web site. And if you happen to be attending *KeyCon* in Winnipeg, drop by our table in the Dealer Room and say hello. •

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Ever wanted to see what some of the *On Spec* people look like behind their bylines? Now you can—literally! Those of you on Facebook are encouraged to visit *On Spec*'s group page by searching '**I Read On Spec**' at **www.facebook.com**.

Join our social networking community, add your 2 cents to the discussion boards, discover calls for submissions and contests that didn't make it into the magazine, or just share your own cool links with other SF fans—**social networking is fun!**

"What is your name, old man?"
she asked. "Why does the mob
take pleasure in your death?"

Aesop' Last Fable

Tony Pi

The priests of Apollo and their minions pushed me to the edge of the cliff, and I steadied myself lest I stumble and fall into the sea far below. Again, the long-eared Nikostratus goaded me. "You have been sentenced to die, Aesop. Clear your conscience and tell us why you stole the sacred cup!"

"I hold to the truth." How I rued the day King Croesus sent me to Delphi! As his ambassador, I had visited the many republics of Greece, bringing tributes on his behalf and telling my fables to impart wisdom to their people. But when I came to Delphi with his great gift of gold, the barefaced greed among the citizens sickened me so that I refused them their spoils. I fashioned my contempt into scathing fables to humble and educate them, but the proud Delphians took my lessons for slander and schemed to punish me. "You accuse me of heinous theft and sacrilege, but it is *you* who planted the cup amongst my belongings. Are you so blind to your own greed, so proud that you would frame an innocent man and execute him to silence his opinions?"

"You *dare* accuse us of conspiracy?" shouted Nikostratus. "We citizens of Delphi are renowned in all the Aegean for our piety and wisdom, while you are a convicted thief! Whose word is worth more?"

I could not hold back my rage. "Piety? Wisdom? You Delphians

know justice like blind moles know the sky!" I strode up to Nikostratus, stared into his eyes, and told the crowd one last fable about an old man led to his doom by a pack of jackasses. To drive home my point, I made donkey's ears with my fingers to mock Nikostratus.

As my liege Croesus once said, my tongue would prove the death of me. He was right. The allusion was not lost on Nikostratus, and his face flushed crimson-red. "Enough!" He and his men grabbed me by my limbs and hurled me from the precipice into the sea.

The impact against the water shattered my bones and crushed the breath from my body. The bitter sea raced in to fill my lungs. Agony overwhelmed me, and I died. My broken flesh began to sink and I panicked, fearing it would drag my soul into the depths. Without warning, great claws snagged my shoulders and my shade was torn from my body. Something hauled me across the waves to cast me down upon a rocky shore.

When I regained my senses, I saw what creature had caught me. Her leonine body, her eagle's wings, and her vicious, beautiful face—she was the Sphinx of legend.

The midday sun shone through her, and I recoiled from the tortured faces that squirmed inside her gut, howling for release. I threw my arms up to shield my eyes, but my limbs had become hazy as mist.

She was a shade, and so was I.

I tried to crawl away, but the Sphinx caught me and held me down with a single paw. No matter how hard I struggled, I could not escape. I had thought fear only a condition of the living, but I was wrong.

She bared her fangs in a chilling parody of a smile.

"What is your name, old man?" she asked. "Why does the mob take pleasure in your death?"

"Aesop," I managed. "They're crows feasting on carrion, who sped me to an unjust death." I recounted the sins of the Delphians against me to the Sphinx, who listened patiently to my grievance.

"In their folly, they also gave you to me. There are better fates, Aesop," she said.

"I expected Hermes the Guide to usher me into the afterlife, not the Sphinx," I said.

"Hermes will not come for you," said she. "There remains a riddle you must solve. Answer it, or be devoured."

I recalled the riddle of the Sphinx. "What has one voice, yet

becomes four-footed, two-footed, and three-footed?" I said, choosing one of the variants I knew. "I thought Oedipus solved that."

The Sphinx growled. "That riddle has already been solved. There is a greater conundrum still, one laced with a curse. I need to know how Oedipus murdered me, or I cannot find rest."

"The myths say that you committed suicide, leaping off a cliff in shame."

She reared and beat her phantom wings in fury, and I took the opportunity to roll away from her. "Not by intention! You think I would sacrifice myself for the sake of a riddle?"

"Rarely can the dead tell their side of the tale, but now you have a chance," I said to calm her. "How did you die?"

"For creatures such as I, our best hope in death is not to dwell in blessed Elysium, but to enter the service of Hades. Harpies, Cerberus, and the Chimera have all earned their place in the underworld, as have other entities of power. I too desired to serve Hades after my death, and sought the Muses on Mount Parnassus to learn what I must do to secure my place.

"The Muses revealed that the god would demand a task of me, and taught me a clever riddle, the one you know. Thereafter, I flew to Boeotia to raze the countryside and cull the weak, until greatness showed itself. When Oedipus solved my riddle, I thought I had proved my worth to Hades, and I was free to wander the world. But when I leapt for freedom, my wings would not spread. I willed them to unfold, but they would not obey. And so I plummeted to my death at the base of Mount Phicium.

"Hermes came to me, but refused to lead me to the underworld. 'You failed, Sphinx,' said the god. 'Hades forbids you to enter his realm.'

"But I played Hades' riddle game! I found your cunning man, even died in his service! Do I not deserve a place by his side?"

"Yet you do not truly understand how you died,' said Hermes. 'Until you solve that mystery, you are cursed to remain between life and death. While you seek the truth, I give you a sliver of my burden: collect the souls of those who perish as you did, falling to their deaths. Challenge them with the riddle of your murder. Devour them if they cannot answer. When you have found a wise soul to free you, I will return.'

"And so my shade has wandered this land, between the sky and the

sea, between the living and the dead. Whenever a mortal plummets to his doom, I am summoned to test him, hoping one can solve my riddle. For centuries, I have devoured the souls who failed, and you are my next meal."

"Unless I solve your death." I forced myself to look again at the anguished faces of the dead within her. Who knew how many there were, or how long they had been suffering? "I suppose I have no choice. Very well! Tell me how you came to plague Thebes, and of the coming of Oedipus."

"Ah, you shall see it for yourself," said the Sphinx. "Climb on my back, Aesop, and see the ghosts of the past."

My curiosity overcame my fear, and I cautiously approached her. The Sphinx laid down to make it easier for me but still I had to grab her ghostly fur and hoist myself up. I settled in the space between her neck and her wings. She was cold to the touch. The Sphinx beat her wings and took flight!

I hollered in surprise and excitement as the sea and cliffs recede far below. I held even harder onto the Sphinx's fur. The world shimmered around us and changed, and the ocean transformed into olive plains before my eyes.

"This is Boeotia. When I first arrived, I gorged on farmers and travelers for seven days and seven nights, leaving alive a few to spread the tale," said the Sphinx. "The news of my rampage soon reached Thebes. It was fear I had hoped to sow, and terror grew from those reports."

The sun streaked across the sky, until it slowed its descent on the western horizon. The Sphinx flew towards the seven-gated city of Thebes, spiraling in until she alighted on top of the palace walls.

"Creon!" roared the Sphinx, re-enacting the past. I recalled from the myths that Creon was the regent to the throne of Thebes since the death of King Laius, Oedipus's father. I kept quiet and watched the Sphinx's play.

"Human! I, the Sphinx, lay claim to your throne and your lands, and all will serve me or die. Send soldiers against me only if you wish them dead. Send clever men instead to try my riddle. If there is one who can prove himself more cunning than I, let him seek me out on the slopes of Mount Phicium. But beware: those who answer wrong will be devoured."

A crowd of brave men soon gathered to watch what the Sphinx would do. An old man garbed in royal fineries emerged from the palace to face us, well-protected by his personal guards. "Leave my city," commanded Creon, but the Sphinx did not obey. "Then swords will settle this," Creon said, and sent ten of his best soldiers against the Sphinx. They came at us atop the wall. Blades were drawn; but the Sphinx swiped with her claws, and the soldiers' limbs were flung far. Their bodies tumbled to the ground below.

"Take care, Creon, or I'll slaughter your citizens, riddle or not," said the Sphinx.

A young warrior approached old Creon to speak with him, and it was clear from their resemblance that they were father and son. "Father, we are the descendants of Cadmus; there is the blood of heroes in all of us. Thebes was born when our ancestor sowed the dragon's teeth, and grew great warriors from them. We must take the Sphinx's challenge. If one falls, another will take his place. Like tooth-born soldiers, we Thebans will not rest until she has been driven from our land!"

Creon clasped his son's shoulder. "Would that all men be as valiant as you think them to be, Haemon!"

"I believe in our kinsmen, Father." Haemon turned to the frightened crowd. "Thebans! What blood burns in you? Let us prove that we are the children of the dragon, and that we can outwit the beast!"

A few stirred, but none stepped forward. In encouragement, Creon offered a prize. "Drive the Sphinx from Thebes, and Laius's throne and his widow will be yours!"

The same greed I had seen in the people of Delphi was plain on the faces of the Theban men. Many stepped forth, claiming that they were cleverer than any other man, and that the kingdom would be theirs. With his father's blessing, Haemon chose a man from the crowd. "What is your name?"

"Antaeon, sire."

Haemon called for his servants, and commanded them to paint crimson serpents on Antaeon's chest and arms. "Let these dragons call forth the courage in your blood, Antaeon. Feast tonight as a hero should, then face the Sphinx come morning."

"I am tired of this bravado," said the Sphinx. She beat her wings and flew us high, and the landscape changed again. The Sphinx landed

on the summit of the mountain below us.

"This is Mount Phicium, Aesop, where I awaited my first victim," said the Sphinx.

The sun rose lightning-quick, and a lone man came up the dusty road. Antaeon bore a fine spear and hefted a solid shield. Raising his head high, he called to the Sphinx for her riddle, and she told it.

Sweat beaded on Antaeon's brow. "The answer is... a tortoise?"

"Wrong!" The Sphinx unsheathed her claws and leapt upon him. When faced against the Sphinx's strength, the warrior's spear seemed frail as straw, his shield delicate as spider web. When he was dead (at least, I hoped he was dead) the Sphinx peeled him from his armor and devoured him.

The days flickered by in rapid succession, and the outcome proved to be the same with the other warriors. "Whether they came out of greed or philanthropy, all tasted the same," boasted the Sphinx. I could feel her trembling under me, and drool slurred her words. "I feasted steadily all year, none able to answer my riddle. Eventually, the number of painted men who came dwindled, and my hunger grew with each passing day. Sometimes I was so hungry, I could hardly see straight. One day, Haemon himself came to me."

Haemon now came up the road, unarmed and calm. The Sphinx sat up stiffly to confront him.

"Sphinx!" said Haemon, standing before us. "We have sent our best and our worst against you, yet none have solved your conundrum. Even the promise of a kingdom seems unable to lure a champion. We have no more to send against you." He shed his himation cloak, revealing the great dragon of Cadmus painted in vermilion upon his chest. "None except me."

"Your father sends you? He must not love you enough." The Sphinx licked her lips. "Thank you for coming. I haven't eaten in days."

"No, he does not know. I am by no means a hero, but I am a Theban. I will gladly give my life to save my people."

"Bravery means nothing if you cannot solve my riddle!" laughed the Sphinx. She asked her riddle. "Your answer?"

"A throne. Four-footed in times of peace, a kingdom cannot be toppled. Two-footed in civil war, the realm divided. Three-footed in regency, when the empire might topple at a touch."

"Clever, but wrong," said the Sphinx. She slew the young prince

with a single blow, and sated her hunger.

I averted my eyes. "What happened then?" I asked her.

"It was three days later that Oedipus came," she answered. "If Oedipus had not been lame, perhaps he would have confronted me before Haemon did, and Creon's son would have lived. I did not think much of the cripple. But he fixed me with his glittering eyes and demanded the riddle from me, and I trembled at the sound of his voice. Perhaps I imagined it, but he seemed to brim with godly power."

I watched the days turn until Oedipus hobbled up the mountain path, seeming more like a shepherd than the king I knew from legend. The Sphinx told him the riddle, and I knew he would answer it right.

"Man," said Oedipus. "Four-footed child; two-footed when grown; three-footed in his twilight years, his third leg a cane."

The Sphinx howled. It wasn't a cry of frustration but one of satisfaction. "You have solved the puzzle! Go claim your just reward!" She ambled towards the cliff, and I clutched her fur tighter than even before. This would be the moment of her death!

She leapt from the cliff for the open sky, but her wings could not unfold. Together we fell, and I screamed when we broke upon the rocks.

• • •

When the pain finally subsided, I found myself back at the base of the Delphi cliff, once again beneath the paw of the Sphinx.

"You could have warned me it would hurt," I muttered.

The Sphinx grunted. "I must endure this pain every time, as do the souls that roil within me."

I thought over what I had seen. I was now certain I knew who murdered her, and how. "I have a solution for you, Sphinx."

She laughed. "The other souls believed they did as well, and they were delectable. Tell."

I shook my head. "First, a fable, for I cannot resist.

"There once was an island in the middle of a river, a haven to many mice who lived in harmony. But their tranquility was shattered when a fox chanced upon their sanctuary and decided the rodents would be his private feast. He would swim onto the island to devour as many as he could before swimming back across the river; he did not

want to risk the mice attacking him while he slept.

"The mice lived in terror of the fox. Though they hid whenever the fox came, the cunning foe always found a way to ambush their kin.

"Then, one wise and brave mouse among them came up with a devious and dangerous plan. 'We will die out if we do not find a way to destroy the fox. I call upon the noble among us to make the ultimate sacrifice; give your lives to save our children. If we do not take a united stand, they will not live to see another generation!'

"With his rousing speech, the brave mouse found like minds among his compatriots, and together they plotted the fox's demise. When the fox came next morning, the conspirators challenged him. Calling them fools, the fox promptly swallowed each and every one.

"Sated, the fox decided to swim home. Little did he know that each mouse he had swallowed had hidden a sharp and heavy rock in its mouth; his belly began to cramp, and the stones were weighing him down. The river's current proved too strong for the weary fox, and he drowned before he could reach the shore.

"Because of the sacrifice of the brave mice, their kin could thrive again in peace."

The Sphinx sat still, considering my tale.

"You think, then, that every Theban each contributed to my death in the same way?"

I nodded. "Do not take fables too literally, as many do, but there are parallels between my story and your ultimate fate. Each challenger had painted vermilion serpents on their skin, thanks to Haemon. I suspect the pigment in the paint was cinnabar. Do you know of it?"

"Vaguely."

"It is a scarlet mineral, from which liquid silver is extracted."

"Quicksilver?"

"Correct."

The Sphinx gasped. "Poison!"

"Exactly. The Egyptians mined and refined it long before us. When I lived in Sardis, serving Croesus, the King often sentenced criminals to harsh labor in the mines of Mount Tmolus nearby. The lesser criminals were sent to mine for gold and silver, but the worst offenders were banished to the cinnabar mines, where they were sure to meet their deaths. Cinnabar robbed them of their reason and health; their words slurred, their hands trembled, their limbs were

paralyzed. Three years was the longest they were expected to live. Your symptoms fit the fate of the miners. I believe Haemon knew the toxicity of cinnabar and purposefully painted your victims with that pigment. After a year of ingesting the poison, it finally killed you. Haemon is the one who murdered you, Sphinx, with the color vermillion.

“Haemon said, *I will gladly give my life to save my people*. Perhaps the lad had been overcome by guilt, knowing he had sent all those men to their deaths. His final act was to confront you, in heroic sacrifice for his people.”

Understanding dawned in her eyes. The Sphinx opened her mouth to speak, but instead of words, a river of souls poured forth from her jaws. They streamed towards the sea, reveling in their freedom.

Lilting laughter rang in all directions, and I thought I spied a figure whispering in the Sphinx’s ear. But as fast as the spirit came, he fled. The liberated spirits began to follow him. Hermes the Swift!

The Sphinx bowed. Her fur had taken on a golden sheen. “Thank you, wise Aesop, for breaking my curse. Go, follow them to Hades’ realm to your deserved rest.”

“Will you not come with me?” I asked.

She smiled. “Hermes has given me the first of my tasks. Hades commands me to plague your murderers until justice is done. For the great service you have done me, Aesop, I am glad to do this thing. Until they learn to venerate you for your wisdom, they will face calamities of my making. The Delphians will learn the cost of spilling Aesop’s blood!”

“Thank you.” I cast a glance at the fading souls. I did not want to go with them: I had left the world too soon, and I was curious what disasters would befall Delphi, especially that ass, Nikostratus. I smiled and raised a hand to the Sphinx’s soft, golden mane. “How would you like some company, Sphinx? I know some stories to pass the time...” •

• • •

HISTORICAL NOTES:

1. The historical context of Aesop’s death is encapsulated in the excerpt below:

“Having been sent to Delphi with a large sum of gold for distribution

among the citizens, [Aesop] was so provoked at their covetousness that he refused to divide the money, and sent it back to his master. The Delphians, enraged at this treatment, accused him of impiety, and, in spite of his sacred character as ambassador, executed him as a public criminal."

"This cruel death of Aesop was not unavenged. The citizens of Delphi were visited with a series of calamities, until they made a public reparation of their crime; and, 'The blood of Aesop' became a well-known adage, bearing witness to the truth that deeds of wrong would not pass unpunished."

- Life of Aesop (1867)

2. There are conflicting versions of Haemon's death, as readers familiar with *Antigone* will know. I've chosen the version that suits my story best, where Haemon dies to the Sphinx. •

Haeland (1000 AD)

Claire Litton

when they said savior
nobody knew what they meant

four dogs on a lonely hill
barking at the sky could not be emptier
than the cup of my fingers

eyes flirt with my beard like whores
there's a girl in a well
and echo
and echo

they lean back and twist
their
fingers
waiting

when I take a step forward
the ground moves away

waiting for someone to save
instead of heal
waiting for someone
to close the door so
the draft doesn't blow through

my faith is a dusty robe
hemmed with whatever's left unspoken •

"And you didn't think that maybe the darkest day of the year was a bad time to hold a wedding that is guaranteed to piss off the Queen of Air and Darkness?"

Carter Hall Sweeps a Path

Marissa K. Lingen

Curling is a game for drunk old men. Wandering around in shoes on perfectly good ice: it just makes no sense. You have ice time, you put on your skates and play a little pickup game, you don't waste it throwing rocks around.

So I can't say I was real respectful when I walked in that night. I had been dating this girl, Gina, who was working an extra shift at the concession stand to save up to go back to school. She didn't mind my practice schedule so much, with her job, so it had been working out all right, mostly. Sort of.

Tam and Janet didn't like her, and Tam is my roommate—at least until Christmas, when he and Jan get married—and also my best friend. And Janet has been a pain in my ass since the third grade, but she's kind of my personal pain in the ass, and I get nervous when her lips get narrow and she stops telling me what she thinks.

I'd been telling myself that Janet had a lot on her mind, what with having to save Tam from the Queen of Air and Darkness and having a baby coming and now a wedding, too. And she'd been pretty peeved when I got Puck to agree to be the baby's fairy godfather, so I tried to tell myself maybe that was the source of her reserve. But deep down I knew she didn't like Gina.

And Gina knew it, too. When I stopped by to see her at work after practice, she said, "Oh, good, you came alone this time. I really didn't want to hear round thirty-seven on the bridesmaid dresses, Carter."

I frowned. "I don't think I've heard anything at all about bridesmaid dresses."

"You know what I mean. Wedding stuff."

I shrugged. "Planning a wedding is a lot of work, and I'm Tam's best man."

She tossed her head and turned away to wipe off the soda machine, which looked perfectly clean to me.

"Anyway, a bunch of the guys are going out tomorrow night. Girlfriends, too, so it wouldn't just be you."

"They've got a Christmas light display on the buildings at Itasca," she said.

"Oh. Uh, sure, I guess we could do that," I said.

"More fun than hanging out with your hockey buddies."

I winced.

"Girl!" one of the old ladies hollered before I could say anything else. "Girl, we're out of beer!"

I knew most of the old ladies in town, but I'd never seen this one before. Even when she wasn't yelling at Gina for another pitcher, her screechy voice cut across the ice. They kept Gina hopping, and I got tired of watching her toss her hair and roll her eyes without any rewards for it, so I told her I'd pick her up tomorrow and headed out. I made sure nobody was throwing rocks when I stepped carefully across the lanes. I swear I was careful.

"Watch where you're going!" yelled the little old lady who had screamed before. She looked like one of those little yellow raisins Janet sometimes eats—sultanas. She looked like a sultana with hair. When she opened her mouth, I could see that all of her teeth were fake—not porcelain or gold or even ivory, but steel.

"I did watch," I said. "Nobody was ready to go."

"I suppose you know everything about it?"

I squared my shoulders. "Look, lady. None of your people were on the lanes. I didn't touch any of your stupid rocks, and if I had, I would have put them back. Okay?"

"You can't just 'put them back'!" she shouted. "It's not like stocking a grocery shelf! It's a precision skill!"

"Oh, sure, precision skill," I said.

"You think you could do this, boy?" said the old lady.

"Hell, yeah," I said. "It's just throwing a rock. How hard could that be?"

She grinned, and her teeth flashed: not just one or two, but all of them steel. "So said the defenders of Constantinople, but Mehmet's army came in, just the same."

"Huh?" I said.

"Put your money where your mouth is."

I hesitated.

"It's a pretty big mouth, boy," she said.

I laughed. "Not much money, though."

"I'm Granny Lesovna," she said. "You can call me Granny Lesovna."

"Carter Hall," I said.

"I know." She looked me up and down. "So are you man enough, Carter Hall?"

I laughed again. "Man enough for what?"

"To beat me at curling."

"Why would I want to?"

The metal smile didn't falter. "Because then I won't kill you."

I swallowed. "Yah, okay, sure. And if I beat you at curling, I won't kill you, either."

Granny Lesovna looked positively pleased. "It's a deal. Two weeks from tomorrow."

"But—"

She could move fast for an old broad, and she was away to the ladies' room before I could argue.

Gina was shaking her head and making skyward entreaties I didn't have to hear to interpret: why her, God? Why was *her* boyfriend such a dingus as to get into curling matches with little old lady James Bond villains? How could the world have given her such a stupid boyfriend? I could just take the whole spiel as given, so I did.

I walked out of there with an uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach. I hoped maybe Tam and Janet were home to talk it over. They were, but Tommy Heikkanen was there waving a piece of paper at them. He'd gotten his wedding invitation.

"And you didn't think that maybe the darkest day of the year was a bad time to hold a wedding that is guaranteed to piss off the Queen

of Air and Darkness?" he said. In anybody else I'd have called the voice emotionless, but with Heikkanen, the flatter the tone, the worse things were. I sat down quietly in the armchair to listen.

Janet shrugged. "She's already pissed. I don't see what the wedding is going to do."

Heikkanen blew out an impatient breath. "Ceremonies are important. Ceremonies *matter*."

"You sound like my grandmother," said Janet. "It's just a piece of paper."

"No," said Heikkanen. "It's not. *She* knows that, even if you don't."

Tam put a protective arm around her. "It's not that our wedding doesn't mean anything to us. It's that—well, we've already made a pretty big commitment."

"I suppose everything is already planned by now," said Tommy glumly.

"Yes," said Janet, "and it can't be helped. I'm *not* calling the caterer back after Dad and I spent three hours with her Monday, not to mention before that."

"What about the rings?" he asked.

Tam and Janet looked at each other. "We can't afford much," said Tam. "Just gold bands."

"No, no, that's good," said Heikkanen. "We'll get my granny down, and she can look at them. And maybe talk to the florist with you."

"I already finished with the florist!" Janet protested. "I don't have time to go back and do stuff I already finished."

Heikkanen just looked at her.

"All right, we'll review stuff with the florist."

"Good. I think she can be down here by Monday, but you can talk to her on the phone before then."

"First my Granny, then my *dad*," said Janet, "and then Tam's mom and now *your* gran. Wedding planning by committee."

"All weddings are planned by committee," I said. "You should be glad you don't have a sister."

"And look what the cat dragged in," said Janet. "What's wrong, Carter? Gina yell at you again?"

"It's nothing," I said, and I retreated to my room.

Early in the morning, when no one was there, I went over and got some of the curling rocks out. They were heavier than I thought. Half

the time I didn't get the rock anywhere near the bull's-eye, and the other half skidded all the way down past it.

I began to think that the broom part was pretty important. Then I realized that Granny Lesovna had curling buddies she could play with, and I had no idea who was going to back me up.

When I turned around, Tommy Heikkanen was standing there watching me.

"Carter, what the hell are you doing?"

"I'm stuck in a curling match with this creepy old lady. I pissed her off and now she wants blood."

Tommy stopped. "Please tell me you don't mean that."

"I don't know what I mean," I said. I described the whole thing to him. When I was done, he looked as squirmy as I felt.

"I'm sorry, Carter, but this isn't one of ours," he said.

I shrugged. "No problem, man. I mean, I suppose not everything freaky that happens around here has to be your, y'know, field of expertise."

Heikkanen looked dubious.

"And hey," I continued, "it might just be some batty old lady, nothing magic at all."

Heikkanen did not look any less dubious.

I went back to trying to toss rocks until it was time to get ready for practice. I had the feeling it wasn't really going to help without the rest of a team, and maybe some opponents.

I made Gina go out with my stupid hockey buddies the next weekend—at least, I'm sure that's how she described it to her friends. Who were not exactly geniuses themselves, thank you very much, and I didn't *make* her, I just *suggested* it, and she said it was okay, but then it... wasn't. It just clearly wasn't. She snapped at Feodorov and called Antozewski a pig and would not let Theriault's girlfriend get a word in edgewise.

"Geez, Gina, lighten up," I said, in one of the annoyed silences that followed her pronouncements.

"I will not *lighten up*!" she shrieked. "I have a right to my opinions, Carter Hall!"

"I know you do, it's just—"

"It's just that you have to control every last word out of my mouth so these icebrains are impressed? Well, I don't care what they think! I

don't care what *you* think! I'm going home!"

I raised my hands in defeat. "Go on, then. You're having such a great time with us here, we'll all miss you."

"And stop coming to my work and pissing off the old ladies!" said Gina, slamming out of the bar.

"Carter?" said Feodorov. "What does she mean about old ladies?"

"Oh, hey, maybe you'll know this one. There's this old bag called Granny Lesovna who got all mad at me."

"Granny Lesovna?" Feodorov shook his head. "Not good. Not good at all."

"Why not?"

He sighed. "Lesovna means 'daughter of the forest.' Not a usual Russian name."

"So she's not really Russian?"

"Don't know. Could be—" He stopped. "Did she wear false teeth?"

"Yes."

"Skinny?"

"Sure, so scrawny I'm surprised she can lift a rock."

Feodorov reared back a little bit. I don't think he even meant to.

"What is it, dammit? What's wrong?"

"Get out now, while you still can."

"You know her?"

"Everyone knows her, you fool. She's Baba Yaga."

I think my first grade teacher read us a story about Baba Yaga once. "The chicken lady?"

Feodorov looked pained. "Don't call her that to her face. *Please* don't."

"Why, what'll she do?"

"You don't want to know, Carter. Really."

"I think I kind of have to know, Feodorov," I said. "I have to beat her at curling this weekend."

"At *curling*?" He looked like he was going to laugh or maybe cry. "She's famous for *sweeping*, Carter, and you're going to beat her at *curling*?"

Heikkanen had buried his face in his hands. He shook his head slowly.

I had to get a better plan.

Heikkanen looked up at me. "You must speak with Don."

Don Shaffer was the curling champion of the town. When he was skip for a team, it won, period and full stop. No one could touch Don with a ten-foot... broom, I guess. He was the main man in the local curling world, the short, bald, twinkly-eyed, grandfather of the whole business. At least, that's what Tommy told me. I'd seen Don around, but I never paid much attention to who won what at curling.

His eyes were not twinkling when he let me into his house that day, and when I explained what I needed—lessons and a team—he curled his mouth skeptically.

"Thought you didn't think much of curling," said Don. "Least that's what you said to Mrs. Lesovna there."

"Come on, Don," I pleaded. "Tell me you never shot your mouth off and regretted it later."

"Nope."

I grinned. "Well, maybe you should teach me to curl *and* keep my mouth shut."

He cracked a smile. "Maybe that."

"She's not from around here, Don, and... I got a bad feeling. You remember what happened this fall, with Tam and Janet?"

He looked away. "Mrs. Lesovna wasn't even here for that."

"Tommy Heikkanen thinks she's the same kind of bad trouble, though."

Don gave me a long, hard look. "That Tommy's a good kid. You should listen to him."

"Well, he thinks Lesovna's bad news, and he thinks I need your help. I know I do," I added hastily.

It felt like a million years while he sized me up. Finally he said, "Arright. Let's get us down to the ice."

I thought I had the general gist of the game, but it turned out it was much more complicated than I'd ever suspected.

"Where's your slider?" said Don. I indicated the rock I was holding. "Naw, naw, that's a rock. Your slider goes on your foot."

"Don't have one," I said. He shook his head and appealed to the sky for patience—or maybe the rink manager. You know that joke, with Ole, and it's the skating rink? God, I love that joke. Stupid Norskys. Anyway, the whole morning was like that, and then there was afternoon practice, and the next day, and the next. By the time I got home that Monday, I was ready to just veg on the couch for awhile and not

think about any of it.

Janet had other plans for me. She shut the TV off, kicked my feet off the coffee table, and loomed her little barely-pregnant self over me like the wrath of God.

"What's gotten into you, Carter? We're relying on you to be of some *help* around here, and you're running off by yourself to do God knows what just when—"

"Baba Yaga is after me," I said. It came out a little louder than I expected. I cleared my throat and waited.

"What?" said Janet very quietly.

"Baba Yaga. She, um... I made her mad, and now I'm supposed to be in a curling match against her, and I don't know how that's going to work out. But if I win she won't kill me." Janet did not look satisfied, so I cleared my throat and added, "Don is helping me. You know, from your Gran's church group?"

"Yes, I know Don," said Janet. She was still using that extremely quiet voice that made me squirm.

"So, um. So that's what's going on. If you have any ideas, I can use all the help I can get." I looked up at her hopefully.

Janet's voice got real quiet, which is always a bad sign. "Here's what I know. *You* are supposed to be the Best Man for *my* husband in *five days*. The tux is already ordered. It is too late for you to get carried off by some damned immortal Russian witch, and I *will not have it*. Do you understand, Carter? Do not screw with my wedding any more than it's already screwed. We have the unplanned pregnancy. We have the crazy Finnish granny warding us against the Queen of Air and Darkness. We absolutely will not have the Best Man chained to a chicken-legged hut for the ceremony. Do I make myself clear?"

I gulped. "Yes, Jan."

"Good."

"But if I don't—"

"So what you will do," she continued, "is you will listen to what Tommy's grandmother says to you. You will listen *extremely* carefully. Because if you don't, you will never get to your curling match, because I will spread your guts across the goal posts and take practice shots at them."

I gulped and nodded. It did not seem like the time to point out that her dad had banned her from the ice until the baby was born.

When Tommy got there with his gran, we all sat in the living room in a row on the couch, and she surveyed us with a dissatisfied air. She was a tiny bit of a thing, sturdy and brisk, next to her hulking grandson. I could hardly believe she could take on the PTA, much less the magical forces of evil.

Then I saw the look in her eyes, and I was satisfied.

"Congratulations on your nuptials," she said to Janet formally, and Janet, smiling, thanked her for coming to help. "Whose protection would you like to claim?" asked Granny Heikkanen.

"Whose protection?" Janet repeated.

I had told myself I was going to stay out of it, but it was hard to pretend I couldn't overhear. "She's under the Puck's protection."

"The Puck!" said Granny Heikkanen. She didn't sound real pleased.

Janet glared at me. "I am not under the Puck's protection. *Jessica* is under the Puck's protection."

"Jessica?"

Tam wouldn't meet my eyes. "She's been calling the baby Jessica."

"What if it's a boy?" I said. "Jessica is a pretty stupid name for a boy."

Janet and Granny Heikkanen exchanged pitying glances. "She's not a boy, Carter," said Janet patiently.

"So you're not under the Puck's protection," said Granny Heikkanen, "and you're not trying to be."

"Damn straight," said Janet, with another glare at me.

"How about the Yaga?" asked Tam.

Granny Heikkanen looked him in the eye until he flinched. "I will forget you have ever said such a stupid thing."

"I just thought if we could pit them against each other—"

"They would tear you up *before* they got to each other, not after," said Granny Heikkanen. "Absolutely not."

"Besides, the Yaga is after Carter, and it wouldn't do to have the wedding party pitted against itself," said Tommy.

And I'd thought the look his granny gave Tam was bad. "Why did you not think to mention this before?"

"You had enough on your mind. And Russians—"

"We have dealt with Russians before." His granny's voice had gotten so quiet that I could barely hear her. That probably meant she

was pissed, if she was anything like Tommy.

"Any ideas you have, I'd really appreciate it," I said before they could get in a fight over it.

"Coffee," snapped Granny Heikkanen. "Lots and lots of very hot coffee. Now. In the matter of your disc jockey, there are certain songs he should not under any circumstances be allowed to play."

"The Chicken Dance?" I said hopefully. "Because someone's cousin always grabs me and tries to make me do the Chicken Dance, and I look stupid either way."

"I find that very easy to believe," said Granny Heikkanen.

The rest of the night wasn't any better, either.

Don brought a couple of his buddies out to practice with me, and I started to get the hang of the sweeping stuff, by which I mean that I wasn't falling on my butt more than one time out of ten. Every once in awhile I'd let a rock go and he'd nod just once, approvingly. Mostly not, though.

I kept thinking how I would have liked to have held Tam and Janet's kid, just once. Jessica or Jesse or some other kid entirely, I didn't really care as long as I got to hold it. That didn't look very likely, and I had no idea what Heikkanen's gran meant about coffee.

Don kept his face carefully neutral, but I could tell he thought the same.

When we got to the ice, Granny Lesovna was already there with her team. They were three other little old ladies who looked very much like her, except their coats were different colors, and their teeth were all very, very white. They were, in fact, white everywhere I could see them: white hair, white skin, sort of weird milky eyes, and those teeth. They weren't sparkly like toothpaste commercial teeth. They were flat and almost grainy-looking, which creeped me out.

Granny Lesovna's steel teeth were still creepier, and she was smiling a lot more than her teammates. "You found an actual team, did you?" she said. "Well, well. I expected you to turn up with a bunch of hockey thugs."

"We stick by our own here," said Don. "Even when they're dumb kids."

"Do you now," said Granny Lesovna. "We'll see about that."

I got first rock, and the guys fixed things up with their brooms so that the rock wasn't too bad, a little further back in the house than

Don would have liked, but not too far off the tee line.

Their rock landed square in the center and managed to nudge ours just out of the outer circle.

For someone with that little expression, Don looked grim.

We were in a pretty bad way with two rocks delivered each, and I made Gina get me a cup of coffee, just in case there was something to Granny Heikkanen's comment. Don jostled me as I was standing there drinking it, and it splashed all over my arm. I was dabbing at it trying to clean up my coat, so for a minute I didn't notice that it had hit one of Granny Lesovna's teammates as well. Her wail was soft and sounded like all the loss and grief in the world.

It had melted her arm clean through, and her hand fell to the ground out of her empty sleeve.

She was made of snow.

Before they could move away, I flung my coffee over Granny Lesovna's other two teammates, and on Lesovna herself just in case. Lesovna leapt forward and raked her claws down my face, but it was too late: the other two were collapsing with the same pitiful sounds the first snow woman had made.

"You wretched little bastard," said Granny Lesovna.

"I guess that means you forfeit," I said. "Unless you want to try to play the match by yourself."

Granny Lesovna let out a screech of pure rage.

"No substitutions," I said. "Original teams only."

Not setting the broom down, she flew straight up into the air. Don watched her impassively, but I'm sure inside he was freaking out. You just can't see it with old guys like that. She flew around near the ceiling and then straight out the door with a whoosh. Don and I both let our breath out. One of his curling buddies sat down hard on the ice, and stayed there.

And Gina came marching over to us.

"Carter, you can *not* spill hot coffee on my customers! Do you want me to lose my job? I can't depend on you to support me with your hockey!" she screeched.

I blinked at her. "I don't recall asking you to."

"When are you going to grow up, Carter Hall?" she demanded.

I looked at her carefully. She had seen the snow yagas melt. She had seen Granny Lesovna *fly* out of the building. And all she could say

was that she might lose her job. I took a deep breath. "Look, Gina, I don't think it's going to work out between us."

She sniffed haughtily. "It took you this long to figure that out?"

"So I don't think there's any point to you being my date for Tam and Janet's wedding."

"I will try to live without the overcooked prime rib," she said, staring over my shoulder.

"Okay, well, bye then."

"What a charming exit line, Carter," she said. "About what I've learned to expect from you."

Did I care? Uh, no. I was more worried about the scratches on my face and how Janet was going to react to having them in her wedding party. But she didn't even bat an eyelash when I turned up scabby at the rehearsal, just hugged me fiercely and ordered me to my place before the pastor got too annoyed to proceed.

So I was all dressed up in my monkey suit the next day, and we'd had our pictures taken about ten million times. The photographer was a cousin of Tam's, and she kept glancing around like we were all going to eat her. I don't think she was used to hockey players. Anyway, with the pictures over, the wedding party went down to the church basement to eat cold cuts and fidget until it was time to start seating people.

Even from the basement, we heard a crunching, shrieking noise outside, like something tearing metal. "Carter," said Janet between her teeth. "Go see what that is."

I opened my mouth to protest and noticed that her shoulder was angled to charge if she had to. "Okay, Jan. What should I do?"

"*Just take care of it,*" she grated. Heikkanen followed me outside at a trot.

When we got out to the parking lot, the crunching, shrieking noise got louder. I looked north. A little one-story tract house with avocado green siding was lurching down the freeway. As it came closer, I could see that it was propelled on huge, bumpy orange-red chicken feet. The claws looked like they could tear cattle in two without stopping for breath. I gulped.

Granny Lesovna was sweeping from the front step. She looked almost normal, very matter-of-fact, until you noticed how effortlessly she was keeping her balance on a lurching chicken-footed house. She

shook her broom at me, but the house kept running. I let out my breath and staggered a step or two in relief. If she had stopped, Janet would have *killed* me.

Some of the guests came in a little shell-shocked around the edges. Probably never seen a tract house run down the freeway before. I turned back inside and went about seating them like nothing had happened. And until we got them up to the altar, I kept glancing out the front doors of the church, just in case.

Tam looked like he was ready to faint. Janet looked stubbornly radiant. Coach Laird was about to cry. And me? I was just glad not to be chained to a chicken-legged hut for the rest of my very short life.

They say it's the little things that make a special day. Boy, is that ever true. •

The Pack Rat's Manifesto

Leah Bobet

We, the pack rats of the world
are building up the future
in the attics of our nephews
page and piece by dusty piece.
Mapping voyages of discovery
for next year, next month, tomorrow
like we used to fill dollhouses
in the hazy summer heat
with secret rooms down narrow hallways
stuffed with shells and stones and feathers
for our wide-eyed, painted toy-men
to discover, sort, and prize
and their fixed-carved smiles, curving
with delight we just imagined
kept us carefully collecting
troves of fresh, un plundered treasure
hid in brand new, wind-creaked grottos
for enthusiastic eyes.
Dormant seeds for some shy child
who will read our crumbling letters
and wide-eyed, take pirate plunder
down the stairs, to a new world. •

The god's servants were necessary, even respected, but people were uncomfortable with their strangeness.

Jakkar's Servant

Marion Bernard

Kirdan dropped his heavy pack and watched as the seeping light slowly revealed the world. Distant mountains became vague impressions of jagged stone topped with snow. The merest hint of green touched dark swells of rolling forest. Kirdan's gaze shifted to his immediate surroundings and he noticed how the wooden walls of shops and residences became painted with color; doors and shutters showed red, blue and yellow. He breathed in the crisp early morning air and recognized the faint sour taint from a nearby midden heap.

"Kirdan, come inside," a smooth, deep voice prompted from the inn's doorway.

He glanced at his master. The older man's blue eyes showed up starkly against his white skin and silvered blond hair.

"Not yet," Kirdan said.

Warl sighed. "Very well. We have the third room on the right. Just make sure you come in before the sun fully crests over the mountains. I have no wish to nurse your self-inflicted wounds a second time."

Kirdan shuddered faintly. The sun's touch had almost killed him a month ago. He had never seen the ocean before and so had defied his nature to stay outside well into morning, absorbed by the power and grace of dancing waves. He remembered the way that sunlight cast

sparkles like magic fire across the ocean's restless surface. The subsequent pain had been almost worth it.

"I'll be in soon," he replied, his eyes drawn back to the unfurling colors around him.

Kirdan yearned to feel the heavy cloak of night lifted off his soul. He missed the day and the life he had taken for granted. It was only seven months ago that his skin first erupted with the puss-filled blisters called Jakkar's Mark. The god's claim had been brutally clear and Kirdan lost everything dear to him—home, family, light and beauty.

Warl passed through Kirdan's village just as the marks were healing and, within a hand of days, the boy found himself locked into this grim apprenticeship. His mother had stifled sobs at their good-bye while his father mechanically mouthed the expected platitudes of blessing and family pride. Kirdan knew his father was actually furious at losing his help in the carpentry shop. Worst of all had been the darting, fearful glances from his little brothers. The god's servants were necessary, even respected, but people were uncomfortable with their strangeness. More than one dark, fireside story was told about Jakkar's servants.

A red glow began to reach into the sky and Kirdan turned to go inside. In the dim light cast by the hall lantern, he saw Warl already asleep on one of the narrow beds. Kirdan shut the door and undressed in the dark. He littered the floor with his oilskin coat, high leather boots and heavy woolen pants. Slipping between chilly sheets, Kirdan felt a pang of longing for the warmth of his brothers.

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Warl was woken by the sounds of restless motion and loud, labored breathing. The boy was having another nightmare. Warl's heart filled with both irritation and sadness. Kirdan was his seventh apprentice and the most difficult one. If ever there was a young man ill-suited to serve the gods, it was this boy. His honey colored curls, upturned nose and pale blue eyes seemed made for the sun's caress and his spirit was unable to find beauty in the glow of moonlight and the muted harmonies of night.

The sound of voices and clattering dishes made Warl realize that it was dinner hour already. He might as well get up and join the locals.

The serving woman would not look into his face but she spoke

clearly enough. "We have mutton stew or roast pork."

"The roast then," Warl said.

He looked around the common room and hardly noticed the averted eyes or stiff backs. Warl was one hundred and seventeen years old and such things had faded to insignificance a long time ago. Jakkar and Sirrika took good care of their servants. Warl knew he appeared to be a healthy man just approaching middle-age. However, he was beginning to feel the deep ache in his joints that told him he needed to perform a service for the gods soon. It had been more than two weeks since he had taken blood. The boy would be even hungrier. Kirdan had not performed a rite in almost two months. Being so much younger, the boy did not need blood to sustain him to the same extent that Warl did, but the craving would already be there.

His food arrived and Warl ate mechanically. This was sustenance for his body and did nothing to appease his real hunger. He pushed away the empty plate and sat back in his chair, trying to look approachable. That was why they had come to this fair-sized village off the main roads. Someone here should be willing to pay the price to send a message to Jakkar, the god of death and justice, or his bright twin, the goddess Sirrika. Jakkar answered best to cries for vengeance driven by untrammelled hatred. Sirrika responded to those asking for aid or protection rooted in love.

A wiry little man slipped into the seat opposite and pushed lank brown hair out of narrowed eyes.

"You are Jakkar's servant?" the man asked.

Warl nodded.

"I would speak with you. Come to my shop tonight. I am Yagger, the leather merchant."

"We'll come in a candlemark or two. When true night falls."

Yagger gave a barely perceptible nod.

Warl watched him dart out of the inn like a dog caught sniffing at food in the pantry. He sighed. It was to be a calling on Jakkar then. He had kept his apprentice away from those seeking the dark god's attention so far. It was hard enough for Kirdan to accept the blood price from a mother using her love to save a child. Perhaps he was coddling the boy. His other apprentices had all tasted blood steeped in hatred and death within a few months of their initiation. They had a duty to carry messages of both love and hate. Each was valid; a primal cry from

man to god.

Kirdan joined him at the table and, as expected, the boy ordered fried eggs and bacon. Warl waited until he was done eating.

"We have been asked to provide service," Warl said.

Kirdan stiffened but did not look up.

"It is a request to Jakkar. I think you should perform the rite."

"You didn't want me to before," Kirdan muttered, sounding like the sullen teenager he was.

"You must be very hungry by now." Warl said and noted the boy's thinned lips and tight shoulders. "Go get our coats and my bag."

They walked down the shadowed dirt street. The sun still cast a few rays of light against the clouds to the east but it was safe enough for them to be outside. They found the leather merchant's shop.

Warl turned to Kirdan and offered, "If you don't feel ready for this, I could perform tonight's rite. There may be another request. Or we could move on."

"It's what I am, isn't it? Might as well get used to it." The words were properly accepting but there was an undertone of defiant anger in Kirdan's voice. Warl let it pass without remark.

Yagger's thin face peered out of the cracks between shuttered windows. He opened the door and ushered them inside quickly. The pungent smell of newly tanned leather filled the room. He directed them to a door at the back of the shop. A big desk covered in ledger books and loose paper dominated the merchant's office. Warl noted the hard wooden chairs.

"Could we not go upstairs to your living quarters?" Warl asked. "You would be far more comfortable lying down."

"No!" the little man said sharply. "My family is upstairs. They must not see."

Warl nodded, accepting that reason. He pulled a small brass plate and some incense out of his bag.

"Can I set this down somewhere?" he asked, surveying the messy desk.

Yagger hurriedly cleared a space. His hands were shaking. The incense began to fill the room with the scent of earth and green growing things, pushing aside other odors. Kirdan was slouched in one of the chairs. Yagger had taken the seat behind the desk.

"What is it that you wish?" Warl asked as he sat down on the only

remaining chair.

“A death.”

“Is your hatred pure?”

The man’s expression turned feral. “I want him gone. He interferes with what is mine.”

“Who is it that you hate so?” Warl continued with the standard questions.

“Never mind,” Yagger snapped at him.

Warl considered the man’s uneasiness. Those that asked for a death motivated by jealousy or greed would be answered, but in unexpected and often dangerous ways. He issued the standard warning. “Understand that making this request is risky if you are driven by anything other than the desire for justifiable vengeance.”

“I am prepared to accept the risk... and pay the price.” Yagger dropped coins on the table and pulled up his sleeve to bare a wrist.

Warl fought down the surge of hunger and turned to Kirdan. “It is your choice.”

The boy was staring at the exposed flesh. He nodded.

Warl rose and directed Yagger into the seat next to Kirdan. “Give your blood to my apprentice and he will deliver your message to Jakkar. May justice be served.”

• • •

Kirdan was revolted by the hunger roused in him at the sight of blue veins bulging beneath pale skin. This was how he served the gods. It sickened him. He lowered his head over the man’s wrist and plunged sharp teeth into flesh. Hot, rich fluid filled his mouth and he swallowed, sucking greedily for more. The power of another’s life force entered him and he could feel his spirit reaching for the gods. Not Sirrika this time; there was no clean message of love burning in this man’s blood. Kirdan could taste the sour flavor of hatred. He also absorbed the cringing fear, old pain and perverse longings which twisted noisome strands through this request. A part of him wanted to vomit up the horror which was filling his belly but his mouth stayed clamped on the other’s flesh and the tainted blood kept flowing. With every drop he understood more.

Old soul-deep wounds had warped this man. Yagger was driven to

seek the pain of others in order to feel strong, needed to make another cower so he could feel safe. The man responded to fear with an unwholesome arousal. Swept away by the powerful forces contained in blood, Kirdan's own body hardened at the image of a delicate face still rounded by the soft curves of childhood, terror shining out of bright blue eyes. Yagger's wish was for his son to die, his strong, young son who stopped him from possessing the girl.

The life force ebbed and Kirdan rose, sated by his bitter feeding. He stumbled backwards until he hit the wall. Then he sank to the floor, moaning.

"What happened?" Warl crouched down in front of him.

Kirdan lifted his head and saw the worried confusion on his master's face.

"Jakkar will destroy this man," Kirdan said in a shaking voice.

Warl let out a soft breath. "So. Sometimes that is the way of things. Come, let's go back to the inn. You need to rest. Then we will talk of this."

Kirdan refused to look at the body slumped uncomfortably in the chair. They should stay to watch over the merchant, offer him a restorative tea when he woke. With unspoken consent, they left the room and shut the door.

• • •

Warl watched his apprentice carefully as they spooned up thick potato soup for breakfast. "We should leave soon," he said casually. "The woman who asked for Sirrika's blessing on her son the other day was likely the only other demand for our services in this place."

Kirdan's spoon froze half-way to his mouth. "Not yet. Another day or two. I need to know..."

His voice drifted off but Warl knew he was referring to the leather merchant. Five days had passed since that night and the god's will had not yet been made manifest.

"Very well. Another two days."

Kirdan continued to eat. "Do you need me for anything tonight?"

"I'd like you to come with me to the herbalist. We should restock our supplies before we leave."

"All right. But after that I need to go for a walk."

Warl nodded. They had talked about the experience in some detail but the boy still had a lot of emotions to work through. Consuming evil was difficult, even for an experienced servant of the gods. He regretted that a boy of sixteen had been forced to face that. At the same time, Warl could see that something had changed inside Kirdan. Last night he had come across the boy out in a field, standing still and silent with his face turned to the pregnant moon.



Kirdan dropped onto the floor of the second story bedroom as silently as a cat. He had become skilled at climbing onto the edge of the water barrel and pulling himself over the window sill. He crept toward the narrow bed and looked down at the figure sleeping amid the rumpled sheets. Her long dark hair stood out starkly against the white linen. Tendrils curled on a fair cheek and he was tempted to brush them away. Kirdan held himself in place. He would not touch her. After watching her silently for several minutes he backed slowly toward the window again. His boot hit something with a soft clunk and a rounded shape skittered across the wooden floor. There must have been a cup or bowl left lying in the middle of the room. The girl stirred and he held in his curses. She turned her head and their eyes locked. He heard her indrawn breath.

"You're not... who are you?" she asked.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to frighten you. I only wanted to make sure you were safe."

"Safe?" The word, and her disbelief, hung in the air.

Kirdan stepped to where the moonlight would catch him fully and reveal his face to her. "I'm a servant of Jakkar. Your father asked... He... It... I just wanted to make sure you were okay." Kirdan stumbled through his lame excuse.

The girl sat up and stared at him. Her eyes looked dark in the dim light but he knew they were a brilliant sapphire blue. He knew exactly how her face looked.

"Jakkar's servant," she whispered. Then she jumped out of bed and grabbed his arms. "I need to send a message to Sirrika. Please," she said and tipped her head back to reveal the clean line of her throat. "I have no coin to offer but I have a ring from my mother. And

I will gladly pay the blood price.”

Kirdan began to bend over the girl to take that more ancient form of offering. He pulled himself straight. “No. I will not do it.”

“You must,” she hissed at him. “My brother is in danger! I would protect him.”

“No.” Again he denied her... and himself.

“You’re trembling,” she said with quiet awe. “You must want this. Take it, please.”

Kirdan swallowed. She had no idea what desires the nearness of her slender body created in him. He wanted to crush her to him and devour her soft mouth. Even the hunger to sink his teeth into the pulsing vein in her neck was suffused with a sexual charge that he had never felt before. Kirdan told himself they were not his impulses. He had been poisoned by Yagger’s sick needs, inflamed by that man’s perverted lust. Gods but she was beautiful. And so young. Only thirteen.

“Let me go,” he begged in a hoarse voice.

“I want to send a message to the gods,” she replied stubbornly.

“You’re too young,” he said. “And it is not necessary. Jakkar will grant you justice. All will be well with your brother.”

She dropped her arms but did not move away. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.” Kirdan breathed in the scent of lavender that clung to her.

The girl walked back to her bed and sat down. She crossed arms over raised knees and looked at him with unwarranted trust. “Do you... my father... He used to hurt my mother. She died a few months ago. Since then he’s... I’m afraid of him.”

Wide eyes beseeched him, wanting explanations, reassurance... something. Kirdan fought his own inner battle and managed to say. “Your father had terrible things done to him as a child. He seeks power over others, to make them feel fear and pain, because that quiets his own torments. But what he would do to you is wrong.”

“So you came here to protect me?”

“Yes,” he answered and saw her accept that as the truth. What a child she was. “I’d better go.” He moved toward the window.

“No. Please stay.” She rose again and intercepted him.

Kirdan looked down at her pleading face bathed in moonlight and could not resist. His lips brushed her mouth. “I can’t,” he said and swung his body out the window.

Kirdan woke to the sounds of music from below. A nervous thrill ran through him. This was their seventh night at the inn. The gods rarely took even that long to answer the blood magic. He was sure something would happen today. Kirdan washed his face and pulled on clothing as quietly as possible so as not to wake Warl.

Entering the common room, Kirdan could not see any empty tables at which to eat. A minstrel strummed his instrument and sang a light nonsense tune. Half the village seemed to be crowded into the inn this evening. Three serving women rushed around, bringing flagons of beer and bowls of stew to the tables. The usual plump woman who had worked there all week pressed a bowl into his hands. He took it gratefully.

Kirdan let his eyes wander the room as he ate the lukewarm meal. He recognized the woman who had asked Sirrika's protection for a son recently hired as a forest ranger. The herbalist's apprentice, a pretty girl about his own age, stood against the wall with several other young women. Kirdan's gaze locked on a different girl's face.

She listened to the music with a rapt expression and clapped her hands in delight when the song ended. Kirdan stayed in the shadows and watched. He saw her twirl strands of dark brown hair around her fingers; saw her smile at a young man. Furious jealousy surged through him.

When a few men stood up to move furniture aside to make room for dancing, Kirdan stepped forward and took up one end of a long table to help move it. He ignored the sharp looks and the way the others turned slightly away from him. Piling smaller tables and chairs on top of the two large ones, a space was cleared in the center of the room. The minstrel put down his beer and took up the instrument again. Kirdan looked around. The girl offered him a small smile and his heart skipped a beat. He walked over.

"Would you like to dance?" he asked.

Her smile widened and she accepted. He pretended not to hear the whispers from the other young women. They danced. Four... five songs, he didn't know. Kirdan tried to act as if he was an ordinary young man enjoying a night of music and the company of a pretty girl. He stifled the darker urges that flared in him at the touch of the girl's

hand, the scent of her hair, her breath on his cheek.

A hand grabbed him by the collar and threw him to the floor. The music stopped. "Stay away from my daughter, you piece of filth," Yagger said into the sudden silence.

Kirdan stood and glared back at the man. "We were just dancing."
"You're a monster and shouldn't be allowed near decent folk."

A murmur spread around the room at that statement. Probably more than one person agreed with Yagger's words but most were not brave enough to say it out loud.

"You're the monster," Kirdan snapped. He sensed Warl come up behind him and put a restraining hand on his shoulder but he kept going, unable to suppress the anger any longer. "I know what you are. I know what you want. What you would do. I carried your message to Jakkar. And I'm waiting to see how you will die."

The stillness in the room was broken only by the sound of breathing and his own loud heartbeat. The man's face went pale, then purpled in rage. Yagger growled wordlessly and threw himself at Kirdan. The force of his charge sent them flying against the stacked tables. Kirdan's hip hit an edge of hard wood and sharp pain shot up his side. His head and arms went flailing into the piled furniture. The whole impromptu structure wobbled. Heavy wooden chairs crashed down. One landed directly on Yagger's exposed back. Kirdan felt a limp weight sag onto him. He pushed the man off and saw him crumple to the floor. Kirdan stared in stunned silence at the body on the ground.

Warl came forward and rolled Yagger over.

"He's dead," the other man said in a level voice.

A babble of voices erupted at that news. Kirdan closed his eyes and wished the floor would open up and swallow him.

"We should leave," Warl said in his ear.

Kirdan looked back at him in mute horror. It was too late. They were surrounded by village men.

"You threatened him," one man said to Kirdan. "I heard you."

"He did not threaten," Warl said. "My apprentice merely stated what he believed Jakkar's judgment to be." Everyone's eyes fixed on Yagger's body.

"Serves him right," a woman's voice said.

"Did he really send a message to Jakkar?" another asked.

The innkeeper confirmed that he had seen Yagger talk to Warl.

“What did he ask for? None of us wronged him.”

A ripple of speculative comments spread across the room as everyone wondered who the target of the leather merchant’s hatred could have been. Several voices demanded that Kirdan reveal what he knew of Yagger’s request. Kirdan shook his head and would not meet any of the villagers’ eyes.

“We’re not permitted to speak of anyone’s message to the gods. You know that.” Warl said calmly. “And, clearly, Jakkar did not find justice in the request.”

Kirdan let the discussion swirl around him. One man admitted he had accused Yagger of selling him poor quality skins. A woman said that Yagger threatened her when she had tried to help his wife. The mention of Yagger’s wife changed the tone of the discussion. It seemed many people knew what sort of man the leather merchant had been.

“Whatever the little sneak asked for, he got what he deserved,” said a blacksmith. He shrugged wide shoulders and stomped out.

The blacksmith’s judgment seemed to sway the others and the surrounding crowd melted away. After a few minutes only a village elder and the innkeeper faced them.

“It was an accident,” said the innkeeper, looking hopefully to the elder. It would be a burden on him if the incident required a trial to resolve.

The other man slowly shook his head. “No. This was Jakkar’s intervention. We have no right to question the god’s decision.”

Kirdan let out a relieved breath. Warl tugged on his sleeve and led the way out of the room. They were upstairs when he heard a voice calling him.

“Wait. Please,” the girl said. She was clinging to the hand of a dark-haired young man.

Kirdan turned but he didn’t reply to the girl’s greeting. He had no idea what to say. Jakkar had used him as a tool in orchestrating this particular ending. It was justice. But it was not something he expected a child to understand.

She stopped in front of him. “Thank you.”

Kirdan blinked. “Your father is dead,” he blurted.

“I know.” Her expression was solemn but not grieving. “You kept your promise.”

She stood on her toes and kissed his cheek. Kirdan looked down at her and saw a pretty young girl, nothing more. His shoulders sagged with relief. The dark fire had been cleansed from his body.

"I am Jakkar's servant," he said. "I serve justice."

"And love," she added softly.

"Yes. And love." Kirdan looked over her shoulder at the young man hovering there. "Take care of your sister," he said.

The other met his look with a level gaze. "I will."

Warl opened the door to their room and Kirdan followed him in. It was time to move on. Their service was required elsewhere. •

Islands Fold: Cover Artist Luke Ramsey

Lyn X

Tell us a bit about your background and upbringing.

I was born in the Cotswolds, England. My family moved to Canada in 1989, when I was nine years old. I'm twenty-eight years old now.

Where does your interest in illustration stem from?

Generally speaking, my love of making it. I grew up watching *Thunder Cats* cartoons, *Robocop* movies and reading *Spiderman* comics. Then I saw the *Akira* movie, and got so excited about wanting to draw more. When I went to Taiwan in 2003, I was inspired to pursue my art full time. My friends Keith Jones and Matt Moroz introduced me to a culture of art that I didn't know existed. They showed me Marc Bell and Owen Plummer zines; they pointed me in a new direction.

What is your educational background, and who are your artistic influences?

I graduated from high school, then travelled. My early influences were Keith Haring and Matt Groening. I'm influenced by too many artists to mention; but right now, I like *Alakazam!* artist Will Sweeney.

What is Islands Fold, and how was it developed?

Islands Fold is an independent publisher and artist residency. My partner Angela and I invite artists to our residency free of charge, who stay up to a week. We collaborate, promote health and well-being by providing local, organic, whole foods, and produce unique art. Islands Fold is sustained through public support by purchasing the publications and various products we sell online. We don't own the house, but we plan to run the residency independently for as long as we can, if people continue to support what we do.

Why did you decide to take the route of a collective rather than pursuing a solo career?

I'm trying to do both. The collective is more rewarding emotionally,

because it's not about business, it's about friendship. The solo is also rewarding emotionally, but offers more financially. Well, sort of. I don't make much money off my art, but I get by. We put our own money and time into Islands Fold, and earn just enough money in sales to pay for our residency expenses. I sell art and do design work, and Ange works a day job; so that helps us get by.

Why do you think other artists are so willing to donate their art to help keep Islands Fold operating?

I think they do it because we offer an alternative approach—we're not charging artists for the residency, and they recognize that we are holistically mixing art, health and people together. And of course, they like the art we produce.



How do you see your Island Folds' projects, and in particular, your own style of artwork, fitting into the greater scheme of both the small press community and the greater arts establishment? Has your experience demonstrated resistance to your type of work, or has it been embraced?

Hmmm. I'd say I fit into the small press community, and I'm fitting into the arts establishment "scheme". I'm very fortunate, because I feel like I've been embraced over the years; but I think that has a lot to do with knowing who I want to be embraced by.

On another note, I think it's important to balance the sophisticated and the juvenile. The juvenile approach is to make art just for the fun of it, regardless of an audience. The sophisticated approach is about knowing your voice and who will listen to it. Artists may struggle if they don't find their voice and community. Artists can also abandon the fun aspect, just to be accepted by the establishment.

What I think is important to know, is that the establishment has no problem filling and replacing the positions. It has no problem telling you what's hot and what's not. It's not going anywhere. So why rush trying to get in? Staying in is a lot harder than getting in.

For me, I'm starting to realize that it's not about fighting the establishment or trying to be accepted by it. It's not about always picking right and wrong, black and white. It's about taking an alternative route. It's about picking what's right for yourself, in hopes that you make the best decisions that promote positivity. Pleasing others is a pleasure in itself, but has its costs if the intentions are insincere. At the end of the day, if I have food in my fridge and a person I love to share it with, then I have all I need. Everything else is a bonus.

Has there been any 'mainstream gallery' interest?

I show in galleries, but I don't just produce work for galleries. To give you a couple of examples: In 2003, I painted a mural for a gallery/bar in Taiwan; the owner didn't like it, and painted over it before I had a chance to take a photo of it. However, five months later, I had my very first art show at the same venue. I learned something very valuable. The mural I originally painted was a reflection of what I saw on the outside. It was rejected and a challenge on my ego. The show I did five months later was influenced by what I saw within. It was embraced and I've tried to keep that approach ever since.

When I got back from doing a few shows in Asia, I wanted to have a show in my home town of Victoria, B.C. I approached a coffee shop about doing a show and put it up, but it had to come down within a few days because of poor organization of schedules. It wasn't the right place for my work, because I was just filling a spot. Afterwards, I approached Legends comic book shop, because I liked what they were doing for the community. The owner (Gareth Gaudin) was totally into
(con't on page 50)







(con't from page 47)

doing a show with me and it was a success, because it was the right place for my work. Gareth gave me a chance because I had an interest in what he was doing.

I know a lot of artists who are all about the take, but fail to recognize when to give, when to show sincere interest. I see right through it now, especially when artists approach us with a "What can Islands Fold do for me?" attitude. With all the artists we've worked with, it has been an equal exchange of sharing. The way we want it to be. Since my first show in Taiwan, I feel really good about the places I've shown. At first I was seeking out specific venues that interested me. Now I have people approaching me, which is nice, so I can spend more time hustling for Islands Fold instead of 'myself'. I dislike the hustle approach at times, but now understand that you have to start off by approaching people, before they start approaching you.

Luke's creative language has been heavily influenced by the "d.i.y" (do it yourself) punk movement, Prem Rawat's message of peace, and a growing list of artists. Luke explores the possibility that art doesn't always conform to gallery walls, although he has exhibited solo shows in Philadelphia, Rochester, Portland and Vancouver. Islands Fold's next non-residential exhibition will be launched in Copenhagen, Denmark in Fall 2008.

I think a lot of artists are too self-centered to be able to work with others in this manner, so it's interesting to me that all of you have been able to consistently make such quality pieces using this collaborative process. Using your collaboration with Peter Taylor as an example, what is your creative process?

When I first started collaborating, ideas were never discussed before hand; but for the past while, there is a goal from the get-go. When collaborating, I try to compliment the other artist's style, and sometimes each artist mimics one another's work. The approach is not about trying to claim your mark, it's about trying to mold two styles as one. With Peter, I set him up with something to mold into, and then worked into what he delivered. I've collaborated with 67 artists to date, and just recently documented selections from this work in the *Mebemewebe* zine. So far, I have never had a collaboration that didn't work out. It's meant to be fun. You're going into uncharted

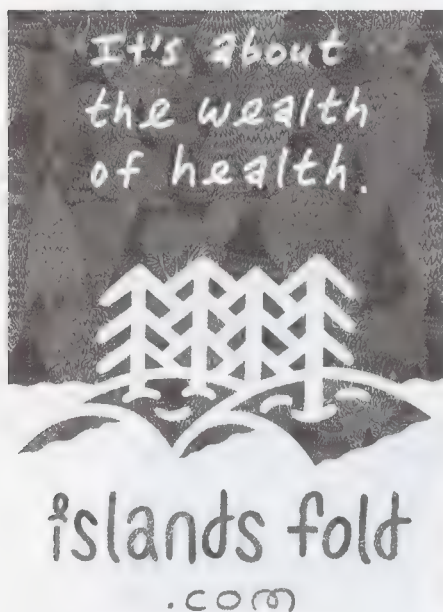


territory, so there are no big expectations. I feel pretty easygoing when it comes to working with other artists. It's not for everyone, and I totally respect that. •

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Photo captions from this interview are as follows:

- Page 45 & below right: *APAK*. Aaron and Ayumi Piland painting a group mural at the Islands Fold residency (2006).
- Page 47: *Mebemewebe* Zine cover by Luke Ramsey and Andrew Jeffrey Wright (2006).
- Page 48-49: From *In Arms Length* zine by Luke Ramsey and Peter Taylor, Islands Fold's first resident (2006).
- Page 51: From *Weast* anthology zine, curated by Luke Ramsey and Errol Richardson (2007).



Entering the city is like entering
a vast and ancient ruin: I see
the cracked façades of
buildings, crumbling cornices,
several limbless gargoyles.
Havana is both timeless and
ravaged by time.

The Masque of the Red Clown

Tyler Keevil

Another hotel in Havana? Where will we find the fools reckless enough to invest? The audience members laugh. They are an easy crowd. All the real financial risk is behind us; it is clear that this hotel is going to be a success. Sweet cigar smoke lightens the mood in the auditorium. Alcohol flows freely from the complimentary bar. Everybody listens attentively as I take them back, outlining the company's original idea and how the project grew from there. I have brought charts and graphs to illustrate how much money the hotel is going to make them. Investors enjoy being pampered; they like to know that you are taking care of their money, taking care of them. By the end of my speech, they are reassured.

Then, from the back row, "What about the effect on the Cuban economy? Aren't monster hotels like this one aggravating the enormous gap between rich and poor?"

The question is facetious and evokes more laughter from the audience.

"There's one in every bunch," somebody shouts.

To prove that I can and have answered such questions, I calmly

Tyler Keevil 53

explain the trickle down effect. True, the majority of profits go to the Cuban government and foreign investors, but the hotel creates jobs for the locals as well. Then there are the tourists who spend their money in Havana: around the markets, at the restaurants, in the bars and music clubs. The poor people benefit too. Everybody wins. My speech is so liquidly smooth, so persuasive, that I almost convince myself. When I finish, the audience applauds ferociously, grateful to be in such capable hands.

The investors and shareholders head for the hotel bar. Tonight, though, I've had enough. My room is just down the corridor from the auditorium. I pass beefy Cuban men lounging beside speakers, stage scaffolding, boxes of decorations. As soon as the hall is empty they will be getting it ready for our grand opening in two days time. We've hired a well-known Cuban band. Celebrities will be coming. Everybody agrees that we've done a bang-up job with the promotions down here. A bang-up job.

Victor catches me slipping away. It is difficult to put anything over on Victor. Slim and blonde and charming, he is one of the major shareholders as well as a true believer in our endeavor. Tonight he is drunk and keeps squeezing my biceps as he chastises me—only half jokingly—for my truancy. I diffuse the situation by asking if he would like to have a nightcap.

"With you? Naturally."

Inside, my suite is both elegant and rustic: Spanish floor tiles, hand-carved wood furniture, original watercolours of Havana. The sliding doors to my patio are open; a warm, wet breeze curls the curtains and brings in sea smells. I loosen my tie, kick off my loafers, pour us both a tumbler of Havana Club. Victor accepts the drink and apologizes for putting me on the spot like that, which perplexes me until I remember the question during my speech.

"So it was you."

"It's fun to stir the pot once in awhile."

"I never took you for a bleeding heart."

Victor waves his hand frivolously, explains that he couldn't care less about the poor. He only wanted to see how I'd react. He tells me I passed with flying colours. All the while he keeps putting his hand on my knee, friendly and flirtatious. Eventually he asks me if I'm going on the company tour of Havana tomorrow. The tour? I've nearly forgotten

about the tour, even though I'm the one who organized it. I tell him I'm going, of course.

But I can't be sure if it's because I want to, or because I feel I should.

• • •

By noon, I'm waiting with two dozen investors near the hotel security gate. The bars—solid, wrought iron, black—glint wickedly in the sun. The rest of the resort is surrounded by whitewashed walls, thick and high as ramparts. I wonder what they're meant to keep out. Something, surely. The very existence of these walls suggests there is something outside, wanting to get in.

Staring at the barricade for too long becomes painful; the sunlight flashing off the whitewash makes my eyes ache. I study the investors instead. Their chosen uniform consists of Oakley sunglasses, a Hawaiian shirt, khaki shorts, Birkenstock sandals. Most of them have white legs and sun-pinkened faces. Their brash, Yankee accents sound strangely foreign, though no different from my own. It's only noon but they've already been drinking. Occasionally one breaks from the flock, drifts over, tells me I made a great speech last night. I smile. This is my job. We talk profit. We talk money. We have nothing else to talk about.

"Gentleman—you weren't going to leave without me, were you?"

Victor has arrived, looking very chic in his collared shirt, bead necklace and cotton trousers. Victor is popular with the investors. A charismatic man. After making the rounds he comes over, nudges me playfully, calls me buddy. Moments later the bus rolls up.

As we cruise along the highway our driver talks about his country. First he apologizes for the poor state of the road, which bumps and bucks us in our seats. Then, guilty for criticizing, he praises Fidel and Communism. I try to listen but Victor and the other investors are shouting and laughing. They keep it up as we rumble into Havana.

Entering the city is like entering a vast and ancient ruin: I see the cracked façades of buildings, crumbling cornices, several limbless gargoyles. Havana is both timeless and ravaged by time. I have seen all this before, of course. Today I notice other details. At the roadside a red truck is stalled, the hood popped, two shirtless men working on the greasy engine. Down alleyways and side streets children play in

puddles, their bare feet kicking up gem-drops of water. In doorways leather-faced men lean like permanent fixtures, eyes slitted against the sun. And everywhere the colourful clothing is evident: loose skirts, snapping trousers, flowing blouses. Sometimes faded, sometimes tattered, but never subdued.

“Yes,” says the driver, “We are a poor people, but happy.”

I’m the only one who hears. The others are noticing things, too. They’ve noticed a woman in rags, big as a Buddha, singing at the curbside. The elephant flesh of her arms jiggles with every wild gesture. Victor makes a joke about land whales, and they all laugh.

The driver, embarrassed, announces that the first stop will be the Capitole building.

• • •

“Hold on a second—I’m out of film.”

Victor wants a photo of me on the steps. I sit and sweat and wait. The wide stone staircase leads up to a pair of massive bronze statues. Behind the statues, concrete pillars line the façade of the Capitole building like a series of bars. Below me, Victor stands on the sidewalk, the lone white stone amidst a river of brown bodies. The Cubans take little notice of him. They just flow on and on—this endless stream of impossibly happy people. Poor but happy, the driver said. The words don’t go together. I know from experience. They can’t be happy all the time. The bitterness, the envy, the depression that accompanies poverty has to have an outlet somewhere, even in Havana.

Beyond Victor, the crowds part momentarily and I notice the clown. Several street performers are working the block but the clown is something special. He stands alone in a white and red striped shirt and black plaid coveralls, both equally marred by streaks of grease and grime. His face is painted completely red except for pale outlines around his eyes and lips. On his head he wears a ragged straw hat and in his hands he carries a battered guitar. A large drum rests like a snail shell on his back. Some kind of flute sits snug in a brace next to his mouth, opposite a similarly mounted harmonica. His one-man band outfit looks like it’s been pieced together from various garbage bins around Havana. He turns his head and, just before the surging crowd envelopes him, I know he has spotted me.

“Okay, ready?”

Victor adjusts the focus and waits for a gap in the pedestrians.

“Try to look enthusiastic.”

I give him my practiced smile. I don’t hear a beep but know the photo’s been taken when Victor retracts the lens. But that clown. Where has he gone? I stand and anxiously scan the crowds. I have a good view from here. I can see almost everything—except what I’m looking for. The clown has been absorbed by the masses of Cubans.

Our tour guide honks twice. Time to go.

• • •

The next stop is the market.

Stalls are set up on either side of a boulevard lined with palm trees. Carriages with two-horse teams rest next to the meridian, ready to trundle tourists along the avenue. I hear the chatter of Spanish voices and smell the rich scent of brine. It almost feels authentic, but I can’t shake the feeling that it’s all been erected specifically for the enjoyment of Victor and his playmates. When I get a chance I splinter from the group, make my own way down the avenue. Each stall is unique. I see beer mugs carved from bamboo, black berets capped by revolutionary stars, shirts adorned with pictures of Ché Guevara, and paintings of Havana like the ones in my room. Finally I stop in front of a stall laden with an assortment of drums.

“Hola,” I say.

The woman working the stall smiles obediently. She wears a red dress and has her black hair done up in braids with white ribbons. She lets me browse without pestering me; content just to watch with her cool, dark eyes. I touch one of the drum skins, feeling it tight and smooth beneath my fingers. Music and Cuba. Cuba and music. The two are entwined like the braids in the girl’s hair. She points at the drum.

“That is five dollars, señor.”

The drum is too small to be anything but decorative. Next to it rests a larger set of bongos, less eye-catching but more playable. I hold them up.

“How much for these?”

“Ten, señor.”

I give her the money, she bags the drums for me.

The stall sits at the end of the market. To my left, a shady alleyway worms its way further into the city. I see water pooled in greasy puddles, pieces of loose cardboard, an overturned oil drum, and colourful laundry lines strung like prayer flags from balcony to balcony. The mouth of the alley smells like old vegetables and urine, and from somewhere further in I can hear music: faint and affecting, a mournful harmony without melody.

I'm still listening when Victor finds me. He spots my bongo drums and giggles as he puts his hand over mine.

"You're such a tourist."

He's eager to show me his own finds: a stone statue, hand-made dolls, three wooden boxes with different patterns carved into the lids. He describes how much each cost him and how much he supposes they're worth, stroking the treasures like a pedophile touching a child.

"Do you like them?" he asks.

I'm no longer looking at them. I'm staring over Victor's shoulder, to the mouth of the alley. The clown has appeared again. I'm certain it's the same clown: plaid coveralls, striped shirt, straw hat. The white circles around his eyes make his expression difficult to read but I know he's looking at me.

"What is it, buddy?"

I point out the clown, try to explain how I saw him earlier.

"He's probably a beggar," Victor says, "Come on—the bus is leaving."

He takes me by the elbow and guides me forcefully down the avenue, away from the music, away from the clown. I look back once. This time, the clown hasn't vanished.

This time he's standing there watching me.

• • •

I see the clown many times after that. I see him as a coloured dot on the far side of Revolution Square, and amidst the crowds pouring out of El Teatro. I spot him once, in passing, as we drive towards Hemingway's Bar, and several times I think I catch glimpses of him in doorways, down side streets, behind windows. But by then I can't be sure; I'm convinced I'm seeing the clown everywhere.

Over lunch I keep my concerns about the clown to myself.

The tour guide takes us to a building with an art deco façade and leads us to the second floor. Everybody agrees that it is a splendid place. We have a room to ourselves with large windows overlooking the docks. Salt and seaweed smells drift in on the breeze, mingling with the spicy odours of the kitchen. On the street below a quartet plays traditional Cuban music. While the music in the alley was mournful and harmonic, this is all bright and bubbling melody. It's fake music, tourist music. Victor loves it.

The investors stuff themselves on crab and garlic butter. Around the table identical conversations take place. Projected annual gross. Quarter term profits. Rising share prices. The words are so familiar it's like listening to old records, except this time I'm reluctant to sing along. I eat little and drink only water. Nobody notices my withdrawal, which comes as no surprise. I know from today that these men are experts at seeing what they want to see and nothing more.

Now the food is being cleared. Talk turns to the party tomorrow night. I am drawn out of my shell, forced to explain how it will all unfold, my brainchild. Victor enjoys hearing me talk confidently, enjoys being reassured. He squeezes my knee under the table, making me feel like a prostitute as I outline the itinerary I have planned: keynote speech, drinks and dinner, Cuban music, salsa dancers, an all-night party.

Eventually our driver saves me by announcing we have time for one last stop. We leave the restaurant in single file. I bring up the rear, lingering, sensing what awaits outside.

The clown stands by the curb.

He looks at me, cradling his guitar like a wounded child. What I originally thought was a flute I can see to be a tin whistle, mouthpiece red with rust. I stop, close enough to touch him, and ask him what he wants. He stares back, stony and unyielding as a statue. Beneath the make-up his face is crosshatched with wrinkles. Deep lines pull at the corners of his mouth, tug at the edges of his nostrils.

"What are you doing, buddy?"

Victor's voice interrupts us. He's leaning out the door of the bus. A dozen other heads watch me from behind the windows. I gesture vaguely. How to explain to Victor or any of them the significance of this clown?

"If you're going to give him some money, just do it."

I dig in my pocket and fish out a dollar bill, hold it tentatively towards the clown. He looks at it as if it's a used piece of toilet paper. The bus driver honks twice. Everybody's watching. I flee the look of disgust in the clown's eyes and scamper onto the bus. What a fool. I storm past Victor, sit alone at the back. When I look out my window, the clown still hasn't moved. His despondent eyes stay locked on mine as we pull away.

• • •

Jesus is our final stop. He stands on a pedestal overlooking Havana Bay. A concrete platform surrounds him so that you, too, can gaze across the water. Out there, tankers and freighters squat on a choppy blue plain. Beyond that lies the Havana skyline: a stretch of domes and concrete blocks broken by the occasional tower. Even from this distance the signs of disrepair are obvious. No straight lines remain in the architecture of Havana. The structures seem to sag and slump like plants wilting in the afternoon heat.

Victor and the others stand at the edge of the viewing platform. They have brought their expensive digital cameras. Little beeps ping out across the bay like half-hearted radar signals. I'm more interested in Jesus. He's smooth and white and larger than life. A tablet rests in one of his hands, the other points towards the mackerel sky in blessing. His grieving eyes and mournful expression remind me of the clown. Stricken by the knowledge of my failure, I trudge back to the bus alone.

The clown, of course, is waiting for me.

He's added a white sponge nose to his outfit. It completes his look: a traditional clown in negative. I apologize profusely for my behaviour at the restaurant. This doesn't elicit much of a response, so I change tactics. I ask him what he wants from me. In reply I only get the same haunted stare. Frantic, I haul the bus driver out of his seat, ask him to talk to the clown in Spanish.

"Hola, amigo," he says, "¿Qué haces?"

The clown keeps looking at me.

"Hola!" The driver pushes the clown on the shoulder. "Hey!"

Still he gets no response. The driver turns to me.

"You want I should get rid of this guy?"

I assure him that it's not necessary. With a shrug, he gets back behind the wheel. The other investors are returning by this point. Soon I have no choice but to abandon the clown for a second time. I sit on the seat closest to him, so that we can look at each other through the window. I see my own face reflected over his. Our haunted expressions are identical, now. Victor sits beside me, obliterating the moment with a familiar hand on my thigh.

"What is it with you and that clown?"

"Leave us alone," I tell him.

Victor removes his hand but stays where he is. The driver starts the bus. Just as we're about to pull away, the clown opens his mouth as if to speak. Within I can see what remains of his tongue: a little stub, the black stitches clinging to it like frightened insects.

• • •

In Victor's room, there are numerous trinkets and souvenirs. At the viewpoint he bought a painting from a street artist. Done in bright acrylics, the canvas depicts Jesus, the platform, and the bay. I sit and watch Victor take down his old painting and replace it with this new treasure. He says things to me as he works. Meaningless things. I drink Mohito after Mohito. I'm not a big drinker but tonight I can't seem to get drunk enough.

"There," Victor says. "Is that better?"

I stare dumbly at the painting. I can barely remember what he's been doing. He notices the vacant look in my eyes, and his expression changes from delight to petulance.

"You're thinking about that clown again, aren't you?"

I say nothing because it's true. Grim-faced, he pours us both another drink then comes and sits next to me on his bed.

"Can you explain it to me?"

I want to, but there are no words. He, too, has seen the clown. But he hasn't perceived it, not like I have. I gulp my Mohito, feeling as if it's my tongue that's been severed instead of the clown's. Victor shifts onto his knees, moves behind me on the bed. He begins to massage my scalp. I feel the cool fingertips pressing in against my skull. Prodding.

"He's just a silly clown," he says, "Can't you forget about him?"

“It’s not that easy.”

The fingers freeze. “You better make it easier.” His voice is hard now. “We need you for the gala tomorrow and can’t have you like this.”

Is he threatening me? It’s unclear. Either way, Victor worries too much. The opening will be a success, whether I’m there with my fake grin and silk tongue or not. He mistakes my silence for anger. When he speaks I feel his lips moving next to my ear.

“I want you here, with me.” He strokes my hair, my brow, the back of my neck. “I don’t know why you’re worked up over that clown, especially when there’s so much else to get worked up over.”

His hand slinks towards my collar like a pet lizard. It’s a shameless seduction, his transparent attempt to distract me. I go with it, letting him unbutton my shirt. He does so, then goes exploring: from chest to belly to belt buckle. I close my eyes. His lips find mine, his hands work me out of my clothes. I let it happen, let him think I’m this easy to manipulate. But as soon as he turns me over, as soon as he’s moving inside me, my thoughts return to the clown. In the end it’s Victor’s lovemaking that’s the key. He’s all take and no give. Such familiar disparity.

When I come it’s a revelation.

• • •

The next morning I return to the market.

Pale, watery sunshine drenches the avenue, dripping from tattered awnings and splashing across cobblestones. Stalls are sprouting up on all sides like so many mushrooms. Groups of locals work together, laying out tables, arranging wares, organizing racks. They laugh and joke with each other while street cleaners scuttle along the gutters, skewering the refuse of last night’s festivities. This is the reality, the careful preparation for an all-you-can-buy buffet that will begin when pasty-skinned tourists arrive to feed. Even my presence is enough to affect the atmosphere. Bright smiles split brown faces. Vendors beckon me to their stalls.

“Hola, señor—for you, my early specials!”

“Only five dollars, Americano!”

I keep my distance, working my way down the boulevard and stopping only when I reach the alleyway. It’s the same as I remember:

greasy puddles, scraps of litter, an empty oil drum. I hover at the entrance, straining to hear. There. Just barely. Just a faint kiss of rhythm, luring me forward. I follow willingly, soft-stepping over broken pavement and scattered debris. The walls are awash with faded pastel colours: baby blues, pale pinks, gentle greens. In many places the paint is crumbling, flaking, peeling back to reveal cracked cement. Every detail screams of poverty and decrepitude, of filth and decay. This, I know, is what the hotel walls were raised against. Yet the people I pass are oblivious to their exile: a young mother smiling at me over the head of her nursing baby; children playing baseball with nothing but a broomstick and well-worn tennis balls; men clustered around a table, laughing as they shuffle and deal grimy cards to one another.

A crescendo in the music urges me on. It guides me first one way, then another—through a maze of alleyways and streets like arteries leading deeper into the heart of Havana. Eventually I'm led to a crowded avenue, hot with midday light. The music here is deafening, no longer coming from one direction but from all sides, overpowering me. An unending variety of musicians and bands have seized whatever space is available—on street corners and balconies, in restaurants and bars. Hidden safely away from the tourists, they are free to play music that's both cheerful and poignant—the upbeat tempos balanced by melancholic harmonies. A particular song hooks me, holds me, reels me into a bar on the next corner. The interior is cramped and cosy, all hardwood floors, sweaty brown bodies, and a long, narrow bar top. From a back-room kitchen comes the hot sizzle of grease, the biting aroma of onion and chilis. Legions of empties and stacks of dirty plates cover the only two tables.

The music tells me that this is the place.

There's a moment when I know I'm going to see him, and then I do. He's tucked into a corner, squeezed between the bar and cigarette machine. His one-man band is in full swing: snare drum rapidly pumping, guitar responding to nimble fingers, recorder squeaking wildly. The people at the bar seem to sway along in an unconscious half-dance. His tune wriggles into my body, infects me, so that when the bartender finally notices my presence, asks me what I want, my finger comes up in time with the beat: "Una cerveza, por favor."

Money leaves my fingers, a bottle appears in front of me. The beer goes down easily, finishing just as the music does. When the applause

subside the clown fixes me with his gaze, as if clarifying that his next song is for me and me alone. Then he begins to play. I listen to the gently reverberating drumbeat, the painful pluck of worn guitar strings, and another sound, sadder still. The clown is singing. Tongueless, unable to form full words, his voice is merely another instrument—ragged and raw and soulful.

By the end of the second song, I have another beer in me and my applause is louder and longer than anybody else's. The faces around me begin to blur. Am I weeping? I give the bartender more money, say 'Cerveza,' and make a roundabout gesture with my hand. Drinks for everyone. You, me, everyone. A roar of approval. Hands clap me appreciatively on the back. Arms loop around my shoulders, giving gracious squeezes. The drunken, happy patrons accept me unconditionally, yet the clown is not so easily bought. He stands in his corner, refusing to slake his thirst, staring at me with those mournful and expectant eyes.

This time, I know what he's waiting for.

• • •

"We've got our magician back," Victor murmurs to me.

I can feel his hand under the dining table, petting and stroking. Throughout tonight's gala he has watched me play my part with professional ease: greeting guests at the door, delivering an amusing welcome speech, working the crowd with handshakes and small talk. Aside from the investors I've grown to know and despise, I've entranced our numerous high-profile visitors. All have been equally fooled, lulled to complacency by my charming spell. Everything is glitzy, glossy, perfect—just as they expected, just as Victor wanted.

I squeeze his hand, deposit it in his lap.

"Where were you all day?" he asks.

"Nowhere in particular."

I feel fine. I feel better than fine. I feel like a Catholic given absolution. When the appetizers arrive I adopt a monk's reserve—eating only bread and water. As at the restaurant, my abstention goes unnoticed. They're all busy gorging themselves on shrimp and babbling about monetary gains. Somebody mentions that the profits from the first quarter alone will pay back the investors in full. Yes, the hotel will

make money. I can't argue with that. All the same I'm drunk by this point—my tongue loosened and emboldened.

"But gentlemen," I say, "haven't you forgotten about the equity shares?"

Much laughter. I am such a witty host. Who says one can't smile and smile and be a villain? After the shrimp comes lobster and after the lobster comes tiramisu and soon enough it is time to move into the main hall for the music. My podium has been dismantled. A stage stands in its place, replete with sound system and lighting rig. Bitter cigar scents—Cohibas and Monte Cristos—mingle with the sickly odour of expensive colognes. Light glints off gold watches and silver chains. Tuxedoed men hold in their guts and chuckle at one another's jokes. Draped in gowns and dresses, women drift in aimless circles, beautiful and vacuous as ghosts. Soon the band appears on stage to cheers and applause. Even before they strike a note I know the tune: all melody, no harmony. It's jaunty and superficial, a hopelessly generic Cuban sound. Perfect for this crowd. As they drone on I wade through the swamp of wealth, squeezing hands, paying compliments, joking tastefully. Biding my time.

At the bar Victor accosts me, presses a hand to the small of my back.

"You're marvelous, do you realize that?"

"You don't know the half of it."

"What's next on the agenda?"

"Wait and see," I tell him.

As if on cue, there's a stir near the front doors. Murmurs of confusion give way to exclamations of dismay. Next comes the silence. It radiates from the disturbance like a shock wave, overwhelming chatter and banter. The musicians stoically maintain their rhythm until they, too, see what's causing the commotion. Then their song dies. Victor's smooth brow creases in confusion. "What is it?" he asks with rising panic. "What's going on?"

Through the sea of bodies, I catch glimpses of shabby coveralls, threadbare sleeves, a ridiculously tattered straw hat. But it's only when the crowd parts momentarily that the source of alarm is revealed in all his impoverished splendour.

Standing by the entrance is my clown.

"How'd he get in here?" Victor hisses.

“The same way as everybody else.” I smile slyly at him. “With an invitation.”

Victor draws back, aghast, yet as I move away he can't find the words to express his dismay. Neither can anybody else. Instead they back up, making room, as if the thought of being touched by the clown terrifies them. Against this glamorous backdrop, his ragged outfit is an outrageous blemish. His mask of red paint appears bloody and demonic beneath the lights. Reeking of filthy alleyways, face smudged with grit and grime, he trudges through the ranks of the rich, carrying his instruments like weapons of war. A corridor of bodies allows him passage to the stage. The hired musicians seem to dissolve, like an illusion or mirage, as he takes their place at the microphone.

The clown holds out his hands, beseeching us to listen.

Unable to resist, all the wealthy people gather around, transfixed by the presence of the clown. In the front row I see Victor, poor Victor, his expression so troubled and unsure. Like the rest of them, he can no longer deny the clown's significance. As they watch, the clown raises his guitar and plucks the strings, testing, then blows tentatively on his tin whistle. It emits a rusty squeak. The audience presses closer, both horrified and mesmerized. His fingers spider-walk to their place on the frets; his foot finds the drum pedal. Soon his poignant chords and hollow beats are seeping through the sound system. When he opens his mouth to begin his tongueless tune, a collective gasp escapes from the crowd. The song is new to them, but painfully familiar to me: bleak and beautiful as a funeral dirge. The haunting notes fill the hall, fill our heads, like the bittersweet memories of lost lovers, dead friends, broken promises. Faces twist into ugly caricatures of grief. The woman on my left sobs suddenly, as if choking. Her husband wipes hurriedly at his eyes. Within moments a chorus of tears and lamentations is rising all around me. We are stricken, overwhelmed by the voice of Cuba's hidden sorrows.

At long last, the harmony has arrived. •

There was a hollowness near his heart where his feelings for his grandparents had once existed. His fingers found that hollowness and pressed against it, as if something could still be found there.

The Sea, at Bari

Claude Lalumière

In Bari, the pizza marinara was more delicious than in Rome. Not only did some Roman pizzerias add melted cheese to this classic pizza (probably to satisfy the expectations of tourists), not only did most of them skimp on the garlic (again, no doubt to avoid offending tourists' underdeveloped taste buds), but the oregano was not allowed the time necessary to flavour the tomato sauce; it was simply thrown on top of the pizza.

But in Bari... the pizza marinara surpassed Mario's expectations: heavily laden with garlic and covered in tomato sauce from which wafted a strong yet delicate aroma of oregano.

Whenever Mario remembered Bari, a complex emotion—part nostalgia, part loss, part happiness, part dread—nipped at his heart. Perhaps, Mario thought, some emotions did not have names—at least, not in English or Italian. Perhaps it was better to let emotions permeate us without needing to name or fix them. It let them live. Mario felt in short supply of living, lasting emotions. He was hoping this trip would change that.

The only other time he'd visited Bari was twenty-five years ago—the summer he turned five. For his birthday, his grandparents had thrown a party, inviting a bunch of Italian children who could not

Speak English. Mario's Italian was limited, but he had fun with the other kids anyway. For dinner they had all eaten pizza—at the time, the absence of cheese struck him as very odd.

Much odder, though, were the events that transpired that night. The dream. The hallucination. Yet he had travelled from Toronto to Rome to Bari in search of this phantasm.

His flight had landed in Rome—there were no direct flights to Bari from Canada—and had decided to spend a few days in the legendary capital. He soon tired of the ubiquitous tourists and the pandering, crass tackiness. All that history turned into a theme park for bored vacationers desperately searching for something to pass the time. There was beauty in Rome—the cityscape as seen from atop the Castel Sant'Angelo; the lush majesty of the Villa Borghese; the piazzas of the historic centre and their boldly opulent fountains; the cats lounging among the ruins of the Area Sacra di Largo Argentina—and, more strikingly, some sort of simmering primal paganism that infected even the Catholic Church, whose Roman expression bespoke a fleshly, breathing, essentially present god rather than the more theoretical deity of Canadian Catholicism. The urgent demeanour and portentous voices of the monks, priests, nuns, and God knows what other orders of robed Catholics wandering Roman streets implied an impatient divinity who did not tolerate laxness from his servants.



The first-class, nonsmoking coach from Rome to Bari smelled like the bedroom of a bed-ridden chain-smoker whose sheets hadn't been changed since, years ago, his wife had died in her sleep, peeing herself as she expired. A permanent stench of stale tobacco permeated everything in Rome and, Mario suspected, Italy throughout. The heavy odour had hit Mario as soon as he entered the airport lounge in Rome following his transcontinental flight.

Despite the malodour, his train seat was comfortable and the service courteous. In front of him sat a strikingly attractive twenty-something Italian, with creamy skin, large expressive brown eyes and dark wavy hair that stopped at the shoulder. Her beauty was not the bland, sterile look of cover models; her features composed a fascinating landscape of subtle asymmetries. She spent the trip sinuously swinging her head

to the music of her iPod. Her face was turned at an angle that let Mario appreciate her beauty for almost the entire five and half hours it took to reach the port city from the capital. He suspected she was conscious of being admired and chose that position to facilitate their unspoken arrangement: letting him get an eyeful while she feigned unawareness and avoided any compromising eye contact. She disembarked at Giovinazzo, one stop before Bari, and let slip a subtle, knowing smile in his direction as she got up from her seat, though the headphones never left her ears.

As Mario emerged from Bari Centrale station, a pungent yet pleasant fragrance overwhelmed the by-now too familiar tobacco stench: the briny smell of the sea, an odour he had never forgotten. It instantly transported him back to that fateful summer spent with his now-deceased maternal grandparents. Despite what had happened here, Mario's mind often wandered back to that fifth birthday, that delicious pizza, and to a memory of telling himself, as he lay in bed that night waiting for sleep, that he was having the happiest summer ever with the best grandparents any boy could have. He could not recall the emotion itself, but he yearned to. He had not since known its like.

There was a hollowness near his heart where his feelings for his grandparents had once existed. His fingers found that hollowness and pressed against it, as if something could still be found there. There were many such inner cavities in his chest. He felt them like tiny black holes that inexorably sucked the empathy out of him and banished it to some void, barren universe.

Mario left his map in his trouser pocket and let his nose guide him. As he was about to step outside the station parking lot, something soft gave under his shoe. An unwelcome odour reached his nose.

Mario swore. Bad enough that his feet ached from walking for three days on the rough cobblestones of Rome—and now this! He located a bench, sat down and examined his sandals: the dog excrement had lodged itself in the grooves on the sole of the left shoe. Both sandals were in generally bad repair anyway. Rome had inflicted as much damage on them as it had on his now blistered feet. He threw the footwear into a nearby garbage can and continued walking in his bare feet.

The street ahead looked like a commercial strip. He would have no trouble finding a shoe store. He was, after all, in Italy.

Mario located several shops that, in theory, could have solved his shoe problem. However, in Bari, stores closed for a few hours each mid-afternoon. Mario had two choices: continue on barefoot or wait an hour or two sitting on a bench in the town's pedestrian shopping strip, bustling with clerks on their breaks.

The lure of the sea was too powerful. He knew that if he waited any longer he would get fidgety and grumpy. So, onward. In less than five minutes, his destination was in view.

The sight stunned him into motionlessness. He gazed at the Adriatic Sea; it felt as if a part of him were stretching out toward the water, as if his skin no longer defined the limits of his identity.

He crossed the boulevard to reach the sea itself.

He had to jump a low stone fence to get to the beach. He was not the only one who had done so. Along the entire length of the shore, people sat on the massive stone blocks, arranged haphazardly, that created a rough barrier between the sea and the land. Some people had cast fishing lines, a few were picnicking; most were simply sunning themselves.

Mario found a small, shallow pool of sea water lodged among three of the blocks. He stepped into that little portion of the Adriatic Sea. The water provided welcome relief from the stinging pain of his blisters.

He closed his eyes and let himself be engulfed by the odour of the sea. It brought back a shadow of some lost emotion. A sense of comfort he could barely remember, hadn't experienced since early childhood.

But just as the emotion grew almost vivid enough to be savoured, that dreadful memory of being swallowed up by the water gripped him so solidly that, even though he knew he was hallucinating, he couldn't snap back to reality. Instantly, he saw it, just as he had seen it then: the monster.

He felt again its cold, clammy fingers clutching his five-year-old body, that prickling sensation of the monster's fingertips hooking into his flesh.

With a start he opened his eyes and found himself back in the present, fresh tears on his cheeks—the first tears he'd shed in twenty-five years.

After the pizza, there was ice cream. Lots and lots of ice cream. Chocolate. Vanilla. Napolitaine. Butterscotch. More containers than he could count. As it was his birthday, Mario was allowed to eat as much as he wanted. Excited by the rare permission to indulge, the boy didn't know when to stop.

He'd had difficulty falling asleep when, at midnight, his grandparents insisted on putting him to bed. All that excitement. All that food. All that sugar.

He did sleep eventually, but woke up less than an hour later. Through his window, in the darkness, the boy smelled the sea—so different from anything in Toronto. Not even Lake Ontario smelled anything like this. The new odour captivated him; every day he wanted to go play in the water, but his grandparents wouldn't allow it.

In his pyjamas, Mario jumped down onto the street from his bedroom window. He followed the smell to the seashore.

He scraped the skin of his hands and feet climbing over the big stone blocks that bordered the sea.

He stood on one of the big blocks and stared down into the darkness of the water. Without another thought, he stripped off his pyjamas and let himself fall into the sea.

A few hours later, a bit after dawn, an old man who habitually fished on the shore every morning found the unconscious boy floating on his back. Mario was quickly brought to the hospital, where they pumped his lungs, shaved his scalp, and bandaged the big gash on his head (a permanent scar would form on the top left side, a bit to the back).

When he awoke in the afternoon, his grandparents were standing over him, worry sculpted on their wrinkled faces.

Mario screamed.

For the rest of his stay in Italy, another three weeks, the boy screamed himself awake every night, but he could never explain why.

At first, his grandparents thought the boy was having nightmares of drowning, that he was afraid of the sea. But they caught him trying to sneak back to the shore. Mario insisted he had to be let back into the water.

"But why, Mario? What do you want there?" his grandmother

asked in her heavy Italian accent.

In an icy and emotionless voice, the boy answered: "I want it back. What it took away from me. I want it back."

No matter how she questioned him, he could not or would not be more specific. They had to lock his bedroom at night and keep a vigil over him in the daytime, lest he risk drowning himself.

His last few weeks in Bari were uneventful. Mario no longer exhibited the unfailing exuberance that had been so characteristic of his personality. Instead, all day long, he sat and stared seaward from the kitchen window, refusing to play or talk, often simply ignoring his grandparents.

When the young Mario had arrived in Italy, he'd been jovial, affectionate, and playful, but when his parents returned from their seminar in India they had found a morose, taciturn and withdrawn child. He barely greeted them. He could no longer tolerate their touch. In fact, he could barely stand their presence and did not hesitate to tell them so, in those cold tones his voice had acquired. Even returning home, to reunite with his friends and toys and comics, failed to lift his mood.

His parents, he knew, mourned the boy they had lost that summer, regretted leaving him all season, blamed themselves for the change in him.

Everyone agreed, as he overheard repeatedly: it was as if he were another person entirely.

• • •

The young Mario no longer cared for any of his pre-Bari friends and spent the next several years in isolation. His parents attempted to enroll him in various activities—swimming, painting, free-form dance, jazz orchestra—but they were no match for the stubbornness of their son. Only adolescence, and the consequent rage of his hormones, forced him out his shell. At age thirteen, he began to notice girls: the shapes of their bodies, the bounce of their hair, the aroma of their skin. He dreamed about them and woke up with his groin moist and sticky. He had no idea what to say to these girls, or how to approach them. All he knew was that he had to get closer to them, smell them from up close, see more of their bodies, touch them.

To the delight of his parents, he joined the track team. Tall and

lithe, Mario was a natural runner. Track was the only coeducational extracurricular sports activity at his school.

His attention soon focused on one girl in particular, who was almost as tall as Mario himself: Lindsay Barron, whose hair was so long it reached the small of her back, whose elegant face he could not stop daydreaming about. At every practice, he would stare at her, but they had never even exchanged a greeting.

A month after Mario started practicing, the coach recruited him for the regional competition, enrolling him in the 200-metre sprint. Mario won the race, by almost half a second. His was the only gold medal his school garnered that semester.

As a result, Mario got to know Lindsay Barron much better. And other girls, too. Many other girls.

• • •

His first night back in Bari, Mario left his hotel room at 1:30 a.m. without having slept. He dressed lightly—a bit too lightly for the temperature, but he did not want to be encumbered by too many clothes.

Quickly, he made his way to the shoreline. He climbed onto the blocks and looked around. Bari was deserted at this hour. Good.

He stripped.

Below him, the sea beckoned.

He hesitated for hours, fear holding him back. He had lost part of himself the last time he ventured into these waters. What made him believe he could regain whatever he had lost by immersing himself again? What if he lost more of himself?

Or, worse, what if nothing changed?

Before the first hints of dawn brightened the sky, he put his clothes back on. By then, Mario was shivering. Whether from fear or from cold, he could not tell.

• • •

Nearly thirty years old, Mario lived alone. He no longer spoke to his family, had not even seen his mother and father since his eighteenth birthday; he methodically ignored their repeated attempts at contact. Call display was such a useful tool.

Once, for three months, he had lived with a girl: Valérie, a French immigrant whose accent he'd found charming. Her long legs, also, had not escaped his notice.

They were both twenty years old at the time. But, like all the high-school and college girls before her, she soon grew irritated with Mario.

He would not hold hands with her when they walked. He insisted on separate bedrooms. He never asked any questions about her life, her dreams, her days. Unless they were having sex, he rarely touched her at all.

Never before had he lived in such close quarters with anyone, and he resented the incessant intrusion on his solitude that resulted from life within a couple.

It wasn't that Mario disliked Valérie but, save for her physical beauty, which he enjoyed admiring, and her usefulness in satisfying his sexual needs, there was nothing about her that held his attention. In that, she was not unique. Mario showed no curiosity about anyone at all—ever.

• • •

His second night in Bari, Mario spent in bed, but not asleep. He cursed himself for his cowardice. Why had he come all this way, if not to jump in the sea? To return to the spot where everything had changed for the worse?

His exhausted body finally succumbed soon after sunrise. Mario had spent forty-eight hours without sleep.

He woke at midnight, refreshed and reinvigorated, after seventeen hours of slumber.

• • •

After the inevitable breakup with Valérie, Mario's success with girls faltered. When he was graduated from college, he stopped seeing girls altogether. Not because he was no longer interested in having sex with them—he still found them beautiful—but he had never been the one to make the advances. They had come to him: attracted by his fit body, his athletic prowess, his height, his thick dark hair, his full lips. With Mario removed from the bustle of school life, such opportunities

disappeared.

Routine settled over his life: he jogged in the morning; went to work as a clerk at City Hall during the day, stopped by the grocery store on the way home, cooked his dinner, read in the evening, and masturbated to internet porn before dropping off to sleep. Weekends and holidays were much the same, with household chores or outings to museums and art galleries to fill the daytime hours.

Occasionally, when Mario heard people converse, he would marvel at how they seemed so involved in what their companions were saying. He wondered what it was that made them so interested in each other, and he felt momentary pangs of envy.

He decided to try. Maybe interest in others came with practice.

On his twenty-ninth birthday, he joined cupidating.web and arranged a few dates. After a handful of disasters, he gave up. It had proved to be a fruitless exercise. His profile had filled up with negative comments from the girls he met through the system.

"He's cute, but WARNING: he's, like, the dumbest guy EVER!"

"He NEVER asked a single question. He didn't want to know anything about me. He kept staring at me like I was a painting or a statue or something."

"The only question this dumb loser asked me was: *Can we go have sex now?* Like, get real, you creepy Ken doll!"

"What a shame that such a cute guy is nothing but a BORING WEIRDO!!!"

And so on.

• • •

The third night, Mario again visited the seashore. Again, he stripped. This time he did not hesitate: he immediately stepped down into the cold water. He was surprised at how shallow it was. He remembered it being so much deeper. Seaweed laced around his ankles. Had he after all simply hit his head and imagined everything?

A few metres out, the bottom dropped much lower. Mario dunked into the water and swam. He followed the shoreline covering every possible place where the monster could have lurked.

Again and again, he swam the length of the area where the incident occurred.

Even if the monster were real, would it have waited for him here for more than two decades? It could even be dead. If it had ever lived. What had he expected?

While he shivered under the hard blast of hot water in his hotel-room shower, he concluded that he had, indeed, hit his head, that the monster did not exist—had never existed—and that its cold fingers had been nothing more than strands of seaweed.



This return to Bari was Mario's gift to himself for his thirtieth birthday. The date itself fell on his last full day in the city. He had spent a week there. The next morning, the train would take him back to Rome. That night, his flight would take off for Canada.

For his solitary birthday supper in Bari, Mario ate the final pizza marinara of his Italian trip. He also drank three bottles of red wine.

In the middle of the night, he wandered once again to the seashore and shouted obscenities at it, as if he could injure it.

The anger felt good. He couldn't remember ever feeling angry before. He should get drunk more often. Maybe that was all he needed to loosen up those emotions.

No... he'd gotten drunk before, and all it did was make him sleepy. No... there was something about the sea here. Something that stirred him.

Cursing and crying, not really knowing why he was doing it, he took off his clothes and once more submerged himself in the sea.

He felt something clammy wrap itself around his wrist. Underwater, he opened his eyes; he immediately recognized that glow.



For twenty-five years, Mario endured this recurring dream:

He is five years old. He falls into the water. Everything is dark. Clammy fingers make contact with his chest. Suddenly, there's a shimmering light. It's a monster, touching him, glowing with a sickly green phosphorescence. The monster is only slightly bigger than he is. It has three eyes, and they protrude from its forehead at the tips of antenna-like appendages. Its mouth wiggles like a handful of worms. It has six

short limbs attached to its crooked, lumpy body. From each limb erupts a nest of weedy fingers. Its skin looks like layers of bloody and mouldy rags. Where the monster's fingers make contact with Mario's flesh, prickly, needle-like shoots insert themselves under the boy's skin. He senses something essential drain from him, leaking into the monster. Then there's a sharp pain as he hits his head.

And he wakes up. Screaming.

• • •

The adult Mario struggled free. As soon as contact between himself and the monster was severed, the glow faded.

Mario surfaced briefly to fill his lungs, then plunged back and swung his hands in wide circles. He would not—could not—let the monster disappear. He had to make contact. Communicate, somehow. He needed to understand.

There was a faint blip of light as the back of his hand brushed against something.

The monster.

Mario's hand closed on a bunch of the monster's fingers, and the creature became visible once more. It was about the size of a medium-large dog.

Mario felt that familiar, horrible pinprick sensation where his skin touched the monster's fingers. That sensation of being drained returned.

No! Not again.

He was not a helpless little boy anymore.

Mario punched the monster's face. This had only minimal effect. Then, still holding on to its fingers, he yanked the beast toward him and hit it on both sides of the head at once.

The pinprick sensation retreated.

Mario swam to shore, dragging the monster, and bashed it against one of the big stones.

Goo seeped from its fractured body. But still it wriggled.

Mario grabbed a loose rock and struck the monster with it until his arm ached too much for him to continue, long after the beast stopped betraying any sign of life.

What was this thing, this creature? He'd been hoping for some

kind of contact. Maybe a sort of telepathic communion that would reveal all. What a ridiculous notion.

He would never know.

But he wanted back what it had stolen from him.

He could only think of one solution. Communication had failed, but what about communion? Rationally, it seemed unlikely to work. Yet, it felt right.

He tore a strip of meat from the monster's cadaver. It ripped easily. He was surprised by the tangy sweetness of the monster's flesh.

The innards, though, proved to be quite bitter.

• • •

Mario nearly missed his train. He jumped onto the closest car, and immediately the doors closed and the train started moving. He had barely located his car and settled into his seat when the train made its first stop, at Giovinazzo.

His heart jumped when he saw her board.

She checked her ticket, and, sure enough, she was seated in front of him again.

She sat down, nodded at him with a brief smile, and took out her iPod.

He leaned over and touched her hand to prevent her from putting on the headphones. Catching her eye, he said, "Per favore?" and asked her name. Hungrily, his fingertips prickled where they met her flesh. •



Yearning for Utopia: A Conversation with Claude Lalumière

Roberta Laurie

Claude Lalumière lives in Montreal with one youngish cat, Aria, and one old dog, Konrad. In 1998 he sold his two bookshops, *danger!* and *Nebula*. He now devotes himself to freelance writing, editing and translating:

- Edits anthologies (eight so far)
- Writes for *The Montreal Gazette*, *POV*, *Montreal Review of Books*, *Locus Online* (and others)
- Edits for McGill-Queen's University Press
- Translates French-English and English-French
- Does text related work for Instinct Films
- And of course, he writes short stories, lots of short stories.

• • •

On Spec: When did you know you wanted to be a “writer”?

Claude: It's a desire that has nagged at me for as long as I can remember. As a young boy, I thought my life would be like Buckaroo Banzai's (although that was years before he was created)—scientist/writer/cartoonist/filmmaker/professor/musician/adventurer all rolled into one. Reality didn't quite turn out that way.

• • •

"When I conceive a story I like to be out walking, lying down listening to music or near a big body of water, staring out at the water."

• • •

On Spec: Do you find yourself pursuing particular themes in your writing?

Claude: Yes, but not intentionally. When I look at my stories, I can see in hindsight what unites them as a group. The thing you'll find in most of my fiction is yearning. Usually you'll find that my protagonists are yearning for a kind of utopia, whether it be societal or personal. It's that yearning that drives them.

On Spec: Do you think this is a reflection of yourself?

Claude: Oh yeah. (He laughs.)

On Spec: What are you yearning for?

Claude: I'm a utopian. There's no question about that. I approach the world as if it were a better place. I try to act not so much in accordance with how the world is, but how I think the world should be.

• • •

"There are two main streams: the more heartbreaking, yearnful stories and dark humour. Dark humour is a big part of my personality as well."

• • •

On Spec: The majority of your fiction writing is speculative. Do you

write in other genres?

Claude: I guess you could say erotica, but I'm not fond of that term. A lot of my fiction deals with sex in a very explicit manner; or, to be more specific, a blunt manner. That bluntness is often a bit much for non-erotic markets. The stories themselves are not "wank stories." They just happen to deal with sex in a blunt fashion.

Mostly I do this weird contemporary fantasy stuff, but I have a handful of stories with no fantasy element whatsoever. I have a new story coming out in an anthology called *Hardboiled Horror*. It's on the border between crime and horror. It's a very dark story, but it has no specific element at all. It's just about somebody, a very yearnful somebody, with a very dark obsession.

Most of my stuff is in a hazy border between genres. Once I've written something I think, "Okay this fits in two or three genres. Where are the best places I can market this?" Although most of my fiction is SF in some way, I don't think of myself in that way. It's what I read a lot of, but it isn't my intention. It's just the way my imagination works most of the time.

• • •

"I'm vegan, and I love to cook."

• • •

On Spec: Do you do most of your writing in English?

Claude: I do all my writing in English. I've been called a lapsed francophone, and that's a very apt description. My parents are francophones. I was brought up in French, and I was educated in French. But as odd as it may sound, English feels like my natural language. I learned English all by myself by the time I was three years old. I don't remember not speaking English. I dream in English. I speak to my pets in English. I know it's absurd, but to me English feels like a natural language. I can understand why I picked up French because my family is French, but English just came to me. They tell me that when I was very young, I used to turn the TV channel to English. I think it's partly because I

was hungry for stimulation, and that was one more thing to learn.

• • •

“Just this year I have two new anthologies coming out. Tesseract Twelve is coming out at World Fantasy Convention in Calgary this autumn. It’ll be my first time in Alberta.”

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On Spec: What do you like about editing anthologies?

Claude: It’s all about the fun of working with text. For me as a writer, the hard thing is the first draft. Once I have the first draft, which I really have to sweat out of myself, I can edit to death. I can combine characters, drop plots, add scenes. It’s effortless. When I edit an anthology, it’s a bit of that. I’m a very hands-on type editor. When I work with my authors, I really work with my authors. I really have fun working with those authors trying to make the story as good as it can be.

• • •

“I enjoy finding new stories that might not have found a home if I hadn’t been the editor to purchase them.”

• • •

On Spec: What types of books do you read?

Claude: I tend to like strange fiction. I like stuff that challenges my perception of reality or presents the world from a perspective that is not the usual perspective. My interest in speculative fiction comes from there. I also have a huge utopian drive that can be found in that type of fiction.

What I read is often on the borders of genres. They’re not books that are clearly science fiction or fantasy. They fall into that grey zone, and that interests me. I also like books that stimulate me. I’m easily bored. I need stories that will startle me, make me think in new ways

and provide connections that I wouldn't have thought of myself.

My all-time favorite writer is JG Ballard. That's clear. Jim Thompson is also one of my favorites. He's possibly the darkest, most depressing author who ever lived, but his novels are brilliantly dark gems. My favorite crime writer aside from Jim Thompson is probably Philip Kerr. After that there are a bunch of others.

There are a lot of authors who have written one great book and yet they've never been able to follow up with something that excited me as much. I think of books like *Geek Love* by Katherine Dunn or *Unquenchable Fire* by Rachel Pollack or *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt. These are some of my favorite books, and yet their authors didn't manage to sustain that greatness.

• • •

Claude also recommends:

- *Crash* by JG Ballard
- *Dying Inside* by Robert Silverberg
- *The Book of the New Sun* by Gene Wolfe
- Anything by Jeffrey Eugenides (author of *The Virgin Suicides*)
- *The Warrior Who Carried Life* by Geoff Ryman

• • •

"I'm a pop/indie culture junkie. Comics, film, music, TV—bring it all on."

• • •

On Spec: Can you tell us about your inspiration for *The Sea, at Bari*?

Claude: That's easy. There's one scene in the story that physically happened—dipping my feet in the Adriatic Sea at Bari, Italy. I conceived the whole story while I was in Bari staring out at the Adriatic Sea. Then that night, I was taking a boat to Greece, so in my cabin on the boat, I wrote the story. There's just that one moment when the fictional character and I intersected (when my feet were in the water).

• • •

"I can rarely say no to a night out bowling or shooting pool."

• • •

On Spec: Where do you think your writing will take you in the future?

Claude: I'm someone who lives in the present to an almost alarming degree. I don't wallow in the past, and I don't worry about the future. So I have no idea where this is taking me. I'm pretty much winging it. Of course I hope that I will have collections coming out on a regular basis, but it's very hard to convince publishers to publish collections. I actually just got a writing grant for a series of linked short stories also inspired by my recent trip to Europe. The same trip where I conceived *The Sea, at Bari*. I keep my eyes open for opportunities, but I never know what's going to happen next.

• • •

Learn more about Claude by visiting his web site: www.lostpages.net. •

It should have been his run.
She should have been his girl.
He took up the challenge.

Trickster

Steve Stanton

Susan Quiznichuk wheeled the Omni-ZP 3000 into the official meeting hall of the United Steelworkers of Luna, Local #19. Fully powered up on a fashion mannequin, with lights flashing and paint knives quivering with potential, the Omni-ZP 3000 looked like a festive flak-jacket on a Mardi Gras security guard—an eight-nozzle digital air-brush system with two hundred and fifty-six true colours and backpack power supply. Derek Thundersky surveyed the scene with a cynical eye.

The elite group assembled, pro-taggers and hardcore fans of the faith, erupted with joyous applause at the culmination of their dreams and sacrificial union dues. Suzie Q, the procurer, curtsied with a dancer's finesse and threw both hands at the mannequin with the aplomb of a gameshow bimbo. "I give you science fiction, my friends," she shouted with delight. "Already field tested by our own Bob the mechanic."

Bob Siderius, a hulking blond beside her, raised his arms in victory, grinning from earring to earring like a football hero. Bob the mechanic had been appointed interim union VP to replace Ken Khan after he was busted weeks prior for tagging *Dominion Dream* just hours before scheduled launch. Ken Khan had been sent Earthside in handcuffs as a show of corporate intolerance for such criminal defacement of property, his painting gear confiscated and his artwork sandblasted clean. The

union hardcore had worked to rule in response, and managed to delay the launch by twenty-one hours in protest. An aftertaste of insult pervaded the sterile air underground.

The crowd's excitement vanished at the news of fresh graffiti. Wide eyes looked from face to face, counting the cost.

"You tagged her?" someone whispered from the back, not daring to believe.

"Third-level exercise room," Bob the mechanic told them proudly. "Union logo with a bullet, my friends. *New Babylon* has been deflowered." He pulled Susie Q sideways against his shoulder. She acquiesced, smiling like a prom queen, and reached down to stroke his thigh theatrically.

No wonder he had such a sappy grin, Derek Thundersky thought with distaste—he had on his arm the unapproachable idol, Suzie Q herself. Suzie Q herself. Derek noticed wet paint still glistening on the knives of the Omni-ZP 3000. It should have been his run, he considered; she should have been his girl. He longed for her with smouldering eyes—her long dark hair, her muscular thighs. She was an ivory-skinned patriot from Slovakia who had clawed her way up the ranks of the European Space Navy before shipping out to Luna. She was a working girl, a welder first-class; she had great legs.

Why should he be left out, Derek wondered. He was top ten on the list, for sure. He had all the credentials of experience. After tagging the dorsal fin on the *Freedom Hope II* just last year, now en route to Epsilon Eridani, he should have been in the loop.

The crowd had turned mixed, muttering. "Third-level exercise room?" a voice repeated. "What's up with that?"

Susie Q scanned the congregation, a politician's smile still pasted on her face. She seemed to be searching for a friend like a stand-up comic with a difficult crowd. Bob the mechanic stood beside her, nodding like a carny bobblehead. Derek targeted her eyes, a query wrinkled on his brow. He took a few steps forward, tipping his heels up. He was five-eleven and not easily unnoticed; but Suzie Q's attention went miles over his head, much to his chagrin.

It should have been his run. She should have been his girl. He took up the challenge.

"The launch cameras will never see it," he told the crowd with authority. "We gotta get outside for it to count. They can't paint over in a vacuum."

All eyes turned at the sound of his voice, the room suddenly still and quiet with expectation. He had the credentials.

Susie Q met his gaze finally, as serious as space eternal. "It was just a field test, Skyman. We're going to tag the bitch just like we planned. The Omni-ZP 3000 has arrived on schedule." She locked his eyes with blue magnets—pale sky-pools into which he had fallen too many times. His breath caught in his throat; his guts froze into cryonic stasis: he loved her with his whole heart.

She released him and turned her cerulean eyes heavenward in exultation. "The union rocks and rules," she shouted.

The crowd exploded with exuberance.

"The union rocks," they chanted.

"Tag the bitch," they roared.

People milled around the Omni-ZP 3000, toasting the future with tubes of illegal swillbeer. Susie Q disappeared into the crowd like an eel in oil, and three stocky females with more on their minds than union etiquette carried off Bob the mechanic.

Derek stood fuming, surrounded by festivity, smelling the sweat of working-class humanity, the pungent smoke of illegal herb in the air, the stink of new fermentation and the fresh scent of history being made, and he tipped up an imported bottle of pure Earth water to his lips, remembering why they were here.

• • •

Colonel Woodsworth Dunfield, late of Windermere on Avon, noticed the berth transfer the moment it hit the network. His forehead monitor beeped with warning, and he flipped a lens down to scan the update. He had his assigned partner, Linda Evans, on first alert—not that he was smothering her, of course. He was simply exercising his interpersonal responsibility, in his estimation, watching out for a bit of a loose cannon, an American girl with wide hips and a Georgia twang that made his pulse flutter.

He slapped his shoulder intercom with less than British reserve, feeling tight, wild panic in his usually steadfast abdomen.

Linda happened to be on a massage table on Level Five, naked but for a thin sheet of white gauze between her and healing hands. Her handbag beeped.

Her masseuse stopped her ministrations long enough for Linda to reach down for her communications cap.

"Audio," she signaled as she held it to her ear.

"Linda? Hi, Woodsworth here. Your berth transfer just came through. A bit last-minute, is it not?"

She winced. "Woody. Yes, I know. Less than twenty-four hours until launch. I spent all day with Chet talking it over. I know Op Services had us pegged for a match, and I respect that..."

Her masseuse thumbed her lower lumbar with serious intent, and Linda positively quivered under her touch. She lost her train of thought.

"So you're moving in with Chet?" Woodsworth asked, feeling the deck shifting under him as though the huge colony ship was already shuddering for the stars. *New Babylon* was a one-way trip to eternity, a Class Two fortress starship heading to Delta Pavonis. Linda had been his assigned mate. They had just tested for sexual compatibility the previous evening. Woodsworth thought he had done okay, all things considered. He wasn't statuesque by any means, certainly not a physical specimen to draw attention in the locker room. He was a bit of a bookworm, if the truth be told. But he was a starship colonel, for heaven's sake, he told himself deliberately. He was on the top-ten list for full command. On the other side of a timewarp variance he might pilot this tug around a virgin planetary sphere. He might walk fertile valleys like Adam in the garden. He might join with his Eve to give birth to a new humanity, a new immortal testament.

But now his helpmate seemed to be helping herself.

"Across the hall, actually, Woody, dear. I know it seems a bit sudden."

"Sudden? The day after our sexual compatibility test, you decide to move out?" Woodsworth's voice sounded strained and violent in his ears. His throat felt raw and dry. He took a deep breath and called on Scottish blood buried three generations deep beneath his blue British brow.

Linda held her palm up backhand to signal her masseuse to end the session early. She sat up and wrapped a sheet around her naked body. This was going to take some finesse.

"How did you think I would feel?" Woodsworth lamented.

"It's got nothing to do with our little tryst. You were completely adequate. I just need some time to think before we make any personal

commitments.”

Woodsworth sighed audibly, overcome finally with realization. The sound of “completely adequate” and “little tryst” echoed in his mind as his libido dribbled away like water.

“Let’s talk about it over dinner, honey,” Linda cooed. “We’re both going to be busy with the launch tomorrow. Let’s get together... oh... Day Three, Second Shift. Things should be settled by then.”

Woodsworth sighed again. Linda worked in botany, so all her stuff was packed and frozen and had been for weeks. Launch was no big deal in her sector, they both knew; but Woodsworth was forced to acquiesce. His own specialty was celestial mechanics and he was top ten on the command list, so his presence was required on the Bridge. He had professional responsibilities, age-old cultural rituals to play out: on behalf of the crew and colonists, he must do his dignified part to say goodbye to everything they all had ever known.



A quarter mile below the surface of the moon, Derek Thundersky waited outside union headquarters with a big, fluorescent-yellow “X” on the back of his jacket. His father was Navaho, though his mother was a northern Cree beauty from Canada who raised him in the folklore and customs of the Ojibway First Nation. His early memories were the story circles of pre-school, the oral traditions of Gitche Manitou and Nanabush and the evil Windigo spirit. Growing up on a modern Reserve, he was a casino brat, and had followed a seamless progress from daycare to public school and from college to the union. Born without any fear of heights, he had earned his reputation as a girder walker in downtown office construction before graduating to the space hangars when an opening came up, then on to the moon to build the huge colony ships that would seed the new empire.

Like ancient tribal warriors preparing for battle, Derek and the taggers gathered with Suzie Q at the roundtable on the last morning before the launch. Only five men, the elect remnant, showed up to meet the procurer, and one had a bad hangover and was washed out immediately.

“Only twenty hours until decompression,” the union president and official elder, Dave Lepinski, reminded the coterie. Derek looked

him in the eye and saw that all hope of success had left his soul already. He checked the two other men. Bob the mechanic had done the field test, and so could not be expected to perform again. That left only Derek and the young African kid, Peter Halaz, who had tagged *Abraham's Envoy* in this very hangar fifteen months ago.

"We're too hot," Peter stated with finality. "Security is double-teaming us, expecting our move tonight. Some fool in the dorms is handing out 'Tag the Bitch' buttons." He shook his head. "It's not like the old days."

The president grimaced.

Suzie Q looked somewhat stern, taken aback momentarily. She glanced from face to face before resting her perfect eyes on Derek Thundersky.

His body tightened, involuntarily galvanic. In an environment where even water and piss were rationed, Suzie Q had just smuggled some expensive hardware past big brother. She was not a painter, nor a politician, though she was an artist not unlike both. She was the procurer and had kept her end of the bargain. She was a networking specialist—everybody was her best friend.

"We need a diversion," Derek stammered. He felt his face heating up, his stomach roiling. What was he saying, he wondered.

The president shook his head on behalf of all his members. "No one's going to sacrifice their union card for a fake tag."

They all cast their eyes downward at the truth of his words. Just like back home, they were on their own as taggers always had been, always would be. There was only one Omni-ZP 3000 ultimate paint suit. They represented one union, one freedom from corporate tyranny, and freedom was not divisible by any sum.

"It's got to be you, Skyman," Suzie Q told him point-blank. "No one else in this whole hangar has got the balls to do it."

Derek squinted his eyes shut as he felt his lungs fill with ice.

The other three men held their breath in astonishment at her audacity.

"You other three wimps know I'm right."

Peter was the first to look up. "It's a suicide run, Miss Quiznichuk," he berated her. "What do you know?"

"I know destiny when I see it," she shouted at him, half-standing now, leaning on the table.

Bob the mechanic swore to clear the lingering air.

"Peter," Suzie Q persisted, "you know every camera in this hangar. There's got to be a way."

Peter Halaz shook his head. "There are only five possible tag points on the vessel, and only two routes in past the lasers. But, believe me, Security has got the same guidance. They'll be waiting for us."

Susie Q turned to the union president, wild-eyed now. "We call them off. We announce that the tag's a washout. Lepinski sits in the main bar all day playing the drunkard and commiserating with the union faithful. Word leaks out. The white-hats take their finger off the pulse. Our screen goes green."

The four men exchanged covert glances, wondering.

"Well?" Suzie demanded.

Dave Lepinski rubbed white stubble on his chin.

As a teenager, Derek Thundersky had painted brightly-coloured native abstracts for the casino tourists and had gained a small following. He tagged his first freight train when he was sixteen, one of those metal monsters that clawed their way through the Reserve twice a day; and two years later, he rode a coal car to Hamilton, Ontario to complete his college entrance exam.

He cleared his throat. "My union card is all I've got, Susan," he confided quietly. "If they send me home I'll end up repairing slot machines and drinking whiskey with my Uncle Norman." His throat seemed so heavy he felt it might explode. He desperately wanted to express his love to her, to bare his skinny soul, since he knew she would never speak to him again after this.

"I know you can do it, Derek," she told him, her eyes brimming. "I know where you come from," she whispered.

A silence hung in the air, a sad silence that cuts men to the heart and divides marrow from sinew..

"It's just a game, Skyman," Peter told him deliberately. "It's just a stupid game."

Suzie Q folded her hands finally and turned to the elder, Dave Lepinski, who had been tagging space freighters when they were in welding school and had seen the end from the beginning. He sighed heavily. "It's possible," he admitted with careful resolution, "but from an official union position, tagging is ultimately a volunteer activity."

Dave Lepinski knew better than to challenge Derek's face. He

picked a callus on his thumb with due diligence, biding his time.

Suzie Q locked her gaze on the chosen vessel and prayed for a miracle.

Derek swallowed, his diaphragm quivering with tension, with promise. He raised his eyes to meet hers. He called on Gitche Manitou and Nanabush the trickster to help him in his hour of need.

"Will you come home with me if I lose my ticket?" he asked her.

The other men looked up at him in surprise, then swivelled their eyes to gauge Suzie Q's reaction.

She blushed with hot blood.

"You're serious? What... you want me to marry you?"

Derek smiled at the certain triumph brimming in his chest.

"Call it what you will. We make a union pact, right here, right now, in front of faithful witnesses. If I get busted..." He hesitated, considering the ineffable. "...you're my girl forever. If I make the tag..." He shrugged and grinned. "...well, you're still my girl."

Suzie Q flushed a deeper crimson. She gaped at him, stupefied by the turn of events.

Time stretched like an elastic band around them, as they floated far from Earth, but deep underground, re-inventing the future.

"You know I love you, Susan," Skyman offered with an ingenuous grin.

A veil of clarity settled on her like a gossamer blanket. Suzie Q looked from face to face with a sudden pure and perfect calm.

"I accept," she promised.

• • •

With less than ten hours until launch, Colonel Woodsworth Dunfield sat in the captain's chair, alone on the quiet Bridge of the colony starship *New Babylon*, at the centre of power. As a boy he had dreamt of this moment; as a young man he had invested his family fortune to earn the credentials that enabled him to join the colony team. He was a recognized expert in his field. He was a celestial navigator. He was having second thoughts.

How could Linda do this to him, just hours before the culmination of everything he held sacred? He felt victimized, vandalized. Maybe he should go back to England and accept a quiet university position, he

thought, publish great scholarly work and marry one of the noble and predictable gentlewomen of his homeland. Perhaps he was not cut out for space travel. Perhaps he was too reserved to play the pioneer. Perhaps he was just too stodgy to impress an American woman.

"Op Services," he spoke into his shoulder mike as he flipped down a lens.

A female simulacrum appeared onscreen. Her name was Wendy. "Automated response," she chimed pleasantly. "How can I help you, Colonel Dunfield?"

Wendy was of course speaking with hundreds of crew members at the same moment. She was a vast network of ubiquitous data, convenient to all, her flawless visage framed with short, brown hair, her skin a tawny multiracial color.

"I'm having some trouble with my assigned partner," Woodsworth confided.

"Yes, I see the data entry," Wendy replied. "Would you like to apply for a new candidate? There are eighty-seven unassigned female crew members on board." She smiled with absolute perfection.

The question caught Woodsworth off guard. Could it be that easy? Could he give up on Linda just like that? His better instincts resisted the thought. He felt that he had a duty to stand up for his partner, for better or for worse.

"Well," he said, wondering at the strange pull of emotion within him, "I was under the impression that we were an exact match, you know, according to our intellectual and psychological profiles."

"Sixty-seven percent probability of successful union," Wendy stated pleasantly, "based on the statistical data reported by the partners."

"Sounds like there's some room for error," Woodsworth muttered, feeling suddenly sweaty in his jumpsuit.

"Misreporting is the biggest factor in unsuccessful matches. There is a tendency for clients to colour the data subjectively to cast themselves in the best light, of course. We try to take this all into account during our analysis."

"My partner moved out the day after our sexual compatibility test," Woodsworth said boldly, seeking absolution from a mere machine.

"Yes, I see the data entry. It's an appropriate response in nineteen percent of all cases," Wendy told him.

"Nineteen percent," Woodsworth repeated, feeling woozy with

heat. "That's a significant figure."

"It's a wild-card category, not easily amenable to objective analysis," Wendy reiterated, "However, in this particular case, you both appear to be matched very well, both reporting expert knowledge and vast experience."

"Right," Woodsworth said. "Of course."

"Was there any problem with fulfillment?" Wendy asked with all the delicacy her animation would allow.

"No," he blurted. "I mean..." He paused, thinking it over. He had been completely adequate. Linda had admitted that herself.

Wendy waited with infinite patience.

"I'd like to schedule a re-test," he stated.

"I can certainly do that, sir. Your partner is under no obligation, however."

Oh, so now he was a "sir," Woodsworth noted. The doctor-patient relationship had gone out the window. "I'll arrange it with her myself, thank you."

"Fine." Wendy smiled with absolute perfection. "Shall I put you through to her now?"

Woodsworth panicked.

His voice caught like a fishbone in his throat.

He choked. Now? Right now? Linda was probably asleep. He checked the time. Less than ten hours until launch. What would he say to her? How could he possibly earn redemption?

"Hello?" Linda's voice sounded in his ear as his lens monitor went dark.

"Linda?" His own voice sounded miles away, foreign. "Did I wake you?"

"Woody, dear," she said pleasantly. "No, I was just settling in to bed. Big day tomorrow."

"Right."

"You at home?" Linda asked, her soft southern-belle voice stirring his heart like a gentle breeze. She should have been in his bed. She should have been his girl.

"No, still at work." He coughed self-consciously. "Up on the Bridge, actually. You know, big day tomorrow."

"You'll do a wonderful job, Woody. You were born to be a starship pilot."

"I was?"

"You're not worried are you, about the mission?"

"No, no. I was just thinking about you, actually... about us." This felt wrong, all wrong. He wanted to reach out and touch her, to hold her hand and promise his heart.

"That's sweet," she said, noncommittal.

"I contacted Op Services," he pushed on against the tide, "about your berth transfer."

"It's an appropriate response in nineteen percent of all cases," Linda told him.

Appropriate response—that phrase of damnation again! "I know, Linda," he said evenly past clenched teeth. "It's just that... I was wondering... I've asked for a re-test of sexual compatibility."

Nanoseconds stretched out like eons around Woodsworth. Silence fell like sackcloth on his sweat-drenched body. He quivered with anxiety, ready to fight, or die a desperate death.

"Woody, you're such a sweet man—"

"Wait," he interrupted. "Linda, hear me out, please. I think I've fallen in love with you, and I just want you to know the truth before you answer."

"The truth?"

Woodsworth swallowed past great constriction in his larynx. He swept dry lips with a thick and heavy tongue. "I may have subjectively coloured some data on my personal assessment form," he told her, "in regard to my sexual experience."

"I see," she said deliberately. "Well, that explains a few things."

"I'm sorry." He felt the need to howl, to release the dramatic fury of his soul.

"I don't know what to say, Woody. You're such a sweet man. I can see why you're taking this all so seriously. You need to relax."

"Relax?" he asked, near hysteria and seeing no way back. He should never have told her. He should never have fallen in love in the first place. Love was dangerous.

"Just take a deep breath, Woody. We'll get together in a few days and talk this out. We'll have dinner and watch a movie and sleep in each other's arms. Don't worry."

She was probably going to report him for cognitive therapy, he thought. She probably had Op Services on her monitor already. He

wished he could see her face.

"I guess you're right," he managed, wheezing an exhalation.

"Of course I'm right, dear. Now, go home and get some sleep. We're launching in less than ten hours. The Governor's going to be here to see us off. Earth media will be streaming the news live back home. You've got to look your best."

"Right. You're right."

"Good night, Woody. Don't worry."

"Right." Could he say *I love you* one more time, he wondered. Just squeeze it in at the end, just in case?

The signal went dead. He stared around the quiet Bridge, his body still vibrating with emotion. He felt responsibility closing in on him, his professional identity. He felt constricted, trapped like a mouse in a maze. He had to get outside, to get some fresh air. He had to go to the bathroom.

He stumbled out of the captain's chair and swayed across the control room like a drunken man in the low lunar gravity. He turned down a vestibule toward the nearest lavatory with his bladder aching below his abdomen. He spied an airlock.

Outside was unfiltered environment, pungent and earthy like home. He longed to walk a cool forest floor again, to pee on the side of a sturdy oak tree that was older than his father's father. In all likelihood he would spend the rest of his life urinating into a conduit and breathing stale recycled air. He would never again walk the moors with a faithful mongrel. He would never again parade the streets of London, the birthplace of the commonwealth of nations.

He cycled through the airlock and stood on the gangway outside the hatch. He was high up inside the hangar but still three stories below the surface of the moon, sheltered just beneath the protective nosecone of the starship. He peered down, over the metal railing, but could not see the floor that lay over a quarter mile below his feet in the murky dark.

He ambled away from the security cameras until he reached a safe spot out of view, then quickly turned and unzipped and began to relieve himself on the side of the expensive, colony starship, smiling at the very thought. He sighed with release and relaxed into a long, golden lunar arch, revelling in the sound of satisfying thunder against the bulwark, oblivious to all else, letting go his deep tension, his psychic

turmoil, letting it all go at last. *Take that for appropriate response, Wendy,* he told himself with pride.

An alarm sounded, hooting with delight.

Woodsworth cursed and fumbled to arrange himself as a figure came running into view down the gangway, loping in full spacesuit gear—no, not spacesuit gear—he was dressed like a cybernaut in a computerized mechanical system with fingers like daggers and ropes bundled at his shoulders. As the figure skidded in slow deceleration to a halt in front of him, they came almost face-to-face, and Woodsworth recognized the graffiti-painting equipment for what it was.

• • •

As the alarms continued to bleat his final destiny, Derek Thundersky stared in surprise at his captor, recognizing the blue communications cap of a registered colonist. Just his luck—a high-ranking officer who shouldn't even have been on the outside this late in the program. Derek noticed dread in the colonel's darting eyes and feared the worst. He glanced at the stain of liquid dripping down the side of the starship and frowned with puzzled recognition. The Omni-ZP 3000 felt like dead weight on his back.

Woodsworth Dunfield palmed his shoulder and spoke into the mike. "Security, this is Colonel Dunfield, here in Sector Seven. I seem to have triggered an alarm up here by mistake. Stand down, Security. I repeat, stand down."

The alarm wailed twice more and left a blanket of silence behind like a healing balm. Derek Thundersky powered down his equipment, preparing to surrender. His paint knives hung limp at his sides below sagging shoulders.

"So, you're an artist?" Woodsworth asked, feeling a quiet calm, a deep strength within him.

Derek nodded toward the glistening stain on the bulwark. "Aren't we all?" he answered. When he saw the colonel's conspiratorial grin in response, a new hope burned in his breast, the possibility of a reprieve from condemnation, perhaps an anonymous escape.

Woodsworth signaled for silence as he held a finger to his ear-piece, listening.

Derek smiled and nodded his understanding.

"A couple of yellow-jackets are causing a bit of a stir down below," Woodsworth told his new friend, "performing some sexual escapade within sight of a security camera. The young woman is already naked to the waist and putting on quite a show."

"That's my diversion," Derek told him simply, and shrugged as best he could in the Omni-ZP 3000 miracle jumpsuit. "That's my girl," he said with satisfaction.

Woodsworth flipped down his lens to see the digital upload. He peered closely, along with several hundred Security personnel on all levels. He flipped the lens back up, marveling at such drama, such strategy, such sacrifice for a greater cause. "Nice tattoo," he offered.

"My name's Derek Thundersky, welder first-class," Derek replied, risking all. "They call me Skyman, but I'm really just a poor kid who got lucky."

Woodsworth stifled his natural urge to offer a handshake to Derek's dagger fingers. "Corporal Woodsworth Dunfield at your service," he said, rocking up on his heels. "I suppose I'm the rich kid who always made the appropriate response. The girl I love calls me Woody."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, sir, and I wish you well on your voyage. Godspeed. The hope of mankind goes with you."

Woodsworth almost laughed at the platitude, but composed himself in time. "You sound like a politician," he said.

"I mean it, sir. We all wish we could go in your place." Derek shrugged. "Really, what do we have back home? Fifty or sixty years until full toxicity? No sense havin' kids now, not grounder kids." He shook his head at the cruel insight. "The frontiers are all up above us now, perhaps always have been."

Woodsworth nodded, sober now and thoughtful. "Mankind will find a way, Derek. Your children will survive."

Derek Thundersky squinted at him, wondering. He quirked a smile. "I guess."

The celestial navigator saw his place in history and embraced it with a grin. "Well, Skyman, we haven't much time. You'd better power up."

Derek's eyebrows popped in disbelief. He froze with awe.

Woodsworth ignored his confusion as he gazed up at the giant starship and spread his arms wide. "Let's tag the bitch," he shouted.

From the lunar surface, the construction hangar appeared no different than the many small spaceports that dotted the moon, dusty domes surrounded by landing fields and sparse aboveground structures. At the moment of launch, however, the retractable roof opened up like a sectioned orange to reveal the expensive payload underground.

The giant colony ship nosed up on chemical, navigational rockets only, the huge antimatter field generator still cold and shiny below, awaiting ignition at safe range outside lunar orbit. Inch by inch *New Babylon* crept upward, metre by metre, slowly gathering momentum.

As the protective nosecone cleared the penthouse viewing level of the hangar, the executive promenade, Derek Thundersky's tag came into clear public view. Cameras relayed their signal by live satellite feed to Earth, where online viewers provided immediate witness and digital recorders chronicled the occasion for future generations. Derek's artistic masterwork, a simple head-and-shoulders portrait, was fully forty feet tall and easily visible at great distance, stunningly presented against a rainbow background of aurorean magnificence.

It was Nanabush, the legendary trickster of the Ojibway and northern Cree nations, born of a human mother and the West Wind Spirit father. He was radiant in two hundred and fifty-six true colours, his pointed ears swept back at a rakish angle on either side of a rhinestone-studded black top hat. His eyes gleamed with mischief. Obscure among the demigods, he had found his rightful place in the limelight, his heritage.

From deep below in the bowels of the hangar, a chorus of cheers rose up like a groundswell of thunder as crowds of raucous yellow-jackets celebrated the union epigraph—payback for Ken Khan and a kick-ass symbol of their continuing solidarity. A wild party was launched and a fabled honeymoon began.

On the control deck of *New Babylon*, Linda Evans stood beside her assigned partner by special invitation and clapped her hands with delight as she watched the camera monitors. Colonel Woodsworth Dunfield quickly shushed her as she threw her arms around his neck and promised her love. He glanced furtively at fellow crew members dressed in full official regalia as they blinked with surprise, like cave

dwellers in a brilliant light.

On the penthouse promenade, at the throne of authority, executive leaders and visiting dignitaries gasped in unison at the corporate defacement, at the scarred battlefield of their pride. Phones flipped down with anger and underlings took the brunt of their wrath as blame was cast down the hierarchy like confetti, like a ticker-tape parade.

In the dark quiet beyond the moon, on his way to the stars for all eternity, Nanabush the trickster looked back and winked his right eye. •



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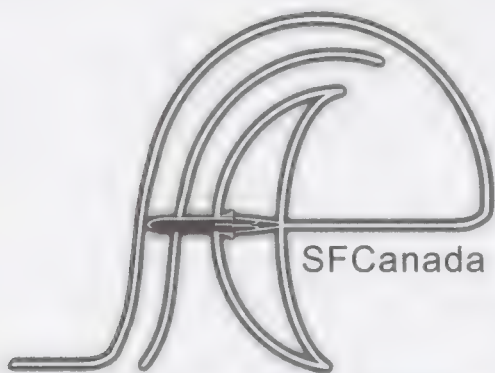
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about our contributors

Marion Bernard lives on the far western edge of Canada. She has a couple of degrees that have nothing whatsoever to do with creative writing and a day job that keeps her supplied with paper and ink. Juggling work, multiple writing projects and a high energy child leaves little time for other passions, however, she does manage to squeeze in time to read, ski and dance.

Leah Bobet lives in Toronto, where she studies linguistics and works in Canada's oldest science fiction bookstore. Her fiction has appeared in *Realms of Fantasy*, *Strange Horizons*, and several Year's Best collections, and her poetry has been nominated for the Rhysling and Pushcart Prizes.

Tyler Keevil was raised in Vancouver, BC. He's been fortunate enough to receive several awards for his short fiction, most notably a *Writer of the Year Award* from Writers Inc. of London. His speculative fiction has been published in a variety of magazines, including *Dark Tales*, *Jupiter SF*, and *Neo-Opsis*. He is currently living abroad while he undertakes his MA in Creative Writing at the University of Aberystwyth.

Claude Lalumière's fiction has appeared in *The Year's Best SF 12*, *The Year's Best Fantasy 6*, *SciFiction*, *Interzone*, *Electric Velocipede*, and others. His stories have been translated into French, Italian, and Polish. He has edited several anthologies of fantastic fiction, including *Island Dreams: Montreal Writers of the Fantastic* (2003), *Open Space: New Canadian Fantastic Fiction* (2003), and *Tesseract Twelve* (2008). He blogs at lostpagesfoundpages.blogspot.com and his website is lostpages.net. Claude lives in Montreal.

Roberta Laurie won her first writing competition when she was 17, and she's been writing ever since. She has been published in three anthologies and is co-editing a fourth, *Snapshots of Stony Plain: A Writers' Landscape*, due to be released this year. Roberta has written for several magazines including *WestWord* and *Yoga Bridge* and volunteers

for the literary magazine *Other Voices*. Currently she is writing and researching a book about the challenges facing the women of Malawi and other African countries. You can learn more about Roberta by visiting her website at www.creativewhispers.ca.

Marissa K. Lingen lives in the Minneapolis suburbs with two large men and one small dog. Her favorite teams are the Wild and the Leafs, but she sometimes cheers for the Oilers because of a fictional character who plays for them.

Claire Litton has been writing since she was three years old and made her first book by stapling construction paper together. She is a professional belly dancer and life drawing model, and enjoys watching movies that are so bad, they're good. She loves all things science fiction, and thinks Joss Whedon is god.

Tony Pi is a winner of the 2006 *Writers of the Future Contest*, appearing in volume XXIII of the renowned anthology series. His other works have seen print in *On Spec*, *Abyss & Apex*, and *Tales of the Unanticipated*, and a rather different sphinx-inspired tale is due to stalk the pages of the forthcoming DAW anthology, *Ages of Wonder*. He lives and writes in Toronto with his partner.

Luke Ramsey is an accomplished underground illustrator and zinester residing in Pender Island, BC. Luke has collaborated with more artists than most people have friends, usually connected to drawing and doodle circles. Read more about Luke and Islands Fold in the interview on page 44 of this issue, and visit the Islands Fold website to see more great art and zines at www.islandsfold.com.

Steve Stanton's short stories have been published in Canada, England, USA, Romania, Greece and Australia. He currently serves as Secretary-Treasurer of SF Canada.

Lyn X started out at *On Spec* five years ago as an office grunt, and became Production Editor just over three years ago. She is also the Artistic Director of the Edmonton Small Press Association (ESPA), an independent media and activist-arts organization that annoys the 'arts establishment', advocates for Fair Trade and social justice, and produces the North of Nowhere Expo, a multidisciplinary festival of independent media and underground art. She is also the Managing Editor of the recently-revived *Our Voice* Street Newspaper, an active citizenship project that offers low-income and homeless people an opportunity to build their skills, supplement their meagre incomes and share their stories. She apologizes in advance for typos.

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